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SHORT STORY WRITING:

An Art or a Trade?

SHORT STORY-WRITING

An Art or a Trade?

by

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NEW YORK
THOMAS SELTZER, INC.
1923

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CHAPTER I

OVERTURE

Moods may be uncomfortable, and sad, and painfully disturbing, but, on the other hand, they make pleasant music occasionally. Here I sit in the dusk, looking out into the street that is ordinarily so familiar to me, but has suddenly become blurred and weirdly mysterious in the gathering murk. A veil is over my eyes, which see the familiar houses across the street, the young poplars in front of them, the few passers-by. But my mind does not discern these objects; it sees far subtler things—floating, flimsy, evanescent. The dusk is in my mind, evoking thoughts, illusions, pictures—and speaking, questioning, singing. The dusk is an overture to the things I have set out to say, playing innumerable variations of my theme, whispering in every note: “Stories, Stories, Stories!”

There are so many stories afloat in the world! Every door and window and curtain and shade has a story to tell; every clod and tree and leaf; and every pebble of a human being washed by the waves of life. And how many of these stories have I helped to be told? And how many have I helped

to be maimed, mutilated of soul? Yes, and how many have I helped to kill?

For I have been teaching, for a number of years, the "Technique of Short Story-Writing," and my guidance and judgment have meant life and death to countless stories born in the breasts and minds of trustful people. I have been the great discourager and encourager of genius and quasi-genius, and I know my hands are not without stain of literary blood.

I am not reproaching myself. Among the many hundreds of men and women who derive their daily bread and clothes and gasoline by directing the story-fancy of the country's million or more literary aspirants, I class myself among the most conscientious and least harmful. The share of injury I may have contributed has simply been the unavoidable accompaniment of being engaged in a profession grounded upon the popular belief that literature is a trade, like plumbing, or tailoring, or hod-carrying, and requires but an understanding of the stupendous emoluments involved and a will to learn. That it is in the interests of the profession to foster and perpetuate this popular belief needs no elaborate substantiation. But that the belief itself should be based on a measure of solid truth is a sardonic phenomenon calling for enlightening discussion.

Professor Arlo Bates in one of his talks on

writing English once said: "Given a reasonable intelligence and sufficient patience, any man with the smallest gifts may learn to write at least marketable stuff, and may earn an honest livelihood, if he studies the taste of the least exacting portion of the public, and accommodates himself to the whim of the time." It is the business of my profession to dedicate its services to the promotion of the production of this "marketable stuff," and to elevate its own calling it has blatantly labeled this product as "literature." With this end in view numerous textbooks have been written, thousands of magazine articles have been published, and millions of copies of pamphlets and other advertising matter distributed broadcast over the country. The magic slogan is "Writers are made—not born!" Then follows a "heart-to-heart" talk on the advantages of a literary career, and the flourishing of some dozen notable successes, measured in formidable numbers of dollars received, usually headed by Jack London and ending with Fannie Hurst or some still more recent "arrival," and finally concluding with the weighty query, explicitly propounded or subtly implied: "Why aren't you a story writer?"

The young man or young woman just out of the gray portals of some fresh-water college and not knowing what to turn to next, or the insipid clerk dreaming over his ledger, or her typewriter, of

some Tyltyl cap thus suddenly comes into possession of a startling idea. Why not be a story writer? The work does not seem hard; compensation is said to be good; and one is master of one's own time and destiny. The would-be casts his lot on the side of practical reasoning, pays in a sum of money to a school of fiction-writing or enrolls for a course with one of our universities, buys a typewriter on the installment plan, and begins to collect editorial rejection slips. When the course is completed another one is taken up, perhaps with another school, thus crediting all lack of achievement to the insufficiency or inefficiency of the instruction received so far, and the typewriter continues to click and the periodic comings of the postman are again awaited eagerly; for hadn't a major part of the instruction been devoted to the inculcation of the conviction that the world is exceedingly tardy in extending its acknowledgment of genius? Why, think of Jack London; read his "*Martin Eden*"—biographical, you know. Then, Masefield, dishwashing in New York, and returning to England to become the foremost poet of the day; and Maupassant working away at his little masterpieces for seven long years before even venturing to bring them before the cold light of the unappreciative world; and Kipling, knocking about the streets of New York with his wonderful Indian stories in his pockets and no editor or publisher willing to look at them; and

Knut Hamsun, working as a common farm hand in North Dakota, and later as a common conductor collecting fares on a Chicago street-car line, finally returning to his native Norway to fame and fortune and, ultimately, to a Nobel prize in literature. Then think of our own more recent story writers—Hergesheimer, writing away in obscurity for fourteen years; Fannie Hurst, submitting thirty-five stories to one periodical and succeeding with the thirty-sixth—and now receiving \$1800 for every short story she writes, you know—etc., etc.

Fully ninety per cent. never do succeed and finally become discouraged and drop out of the ranks. Of the other ten per cent. many live to see their names in print over a story or poem or article in some obscure periodical, while a few ultimately become our best sellers and their names adorn the conspicuous pages in our most popular fiction periodicals. Among the ninety per cent. are the hopelessly incompetent, with a sprinkling of artistic idealists who utterly fail to accommodate themselves to the taste of the public and the whim of the time. Among the ten per cent. are the keen, shrewd, practical craftsmen who are able to get at the spirit of the literary mart. To the chosen ones among these comes the adulation of the populace and the golden shekels blazing a glittering path across the pages of special feature articles in our Sunday newspapers. And these are the writers

who justify my profession in spreading the gospel that one needs but a will to learn to achieve a successful literary career.

If, with some such unpopular fellow as Nietzsche, we should rise to a sublime pinnacle of contemptuous detachment, we might say that the ninety per cent. of failures do not deserve our pity. It is best for a fighting, competitive world that weaklings and incompetents are failures. We might even say that the few artistic idealists among them deserve no better. Life is a process of adaptation and compromise and, among men, a pair of sturdy legs are of greater utility than a pair of feeble wings. Perhaps there is a stern justice in the fate of a Chatterton or, say, a François Villon. But is it not equally possible that by the grim, whimsical jugglings of the gods a mist may sometimes envelop the battlefield of men, such let us say, as brought confusion to the last hordes of the noble Arthur, when

“...friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;
.....and in the mist
Was many a noble deed, many a base,
And chance and craft...”?

Verily, such a “death-white” mist does envelop our literary battlefield, and, in the confusion, my profession, supported by the vast majority of editors and professional critics, is aiding the weak to conquer the strong. Blinded by the mist, we aid

aspirants to rise to power by craft and cunning, and when they emerge to reign for a single day we crown them, thus contributing to the future nothing but the dust of our petty kings. Those who would reign for centuries are jeered at, discouraged, vanquished.

A dozen names leap to mind—pathetic examples of great talent forced to decay, of great sincerity diluted and polluted, of noble fires extinguished. But of all these names the two most pregnant with tragedy are those of Mark Twain and Jack London. The author of "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer," deep, penetrating, cynical, was obliged to play the amusing clown until the end. The author of "The Call of the Wild" and "Martin Eden" until his dying breath continued to fill his lucrative contracts with popular claptrap. If no one in particular can be blamed, the sickly light shining upon our literary firmament must take responsibility. There are formative years when a writer's talent matures, mellows, is molded. The attitude of the populace and, above all, of the oracles on the mountains and in the temples is eagerly watched and heeded. In the case of Jack London the influence of this attitude as a determining factor in the evolution of his career is a matter of record. One of the editors of *The Seven Arts*, a monthly magazine that was too lofty of purpose and too pure of policy to continue existence, once invited

Jack London to submit any stories he might have that had failed of acceptance with the popular magazines because of lack of adaptation. London's reply was that no such stories existed, and concluded with a statement that explains very ingenuously the melancholy disillusionment that pervades the best of his work. "I don't mind telling you," he wrote, "that had the United States been as kindly toward the short story writer as France has always been kindly, from the beginning of my writing career I would have written many a score of short stories quite different from the ones I have written."¹

It is clear, of course, to what particular brand of kindness London had reference. For the United States *is* kindly toward the short story writer, very kindly indeed. It was kindly toward Jack London—but not in the way of helping him to bring forth the best that was in him. And this was his tragedy—and therein lies the unkindliness of the United States toward all its short story writers. It wanted none of the work of Jack London the man with a soul and genuine emotions which burned for expression; it remunerated lavishly Jack London the writer chap for his artificial concoctions that he despised. It made Joseph Hergesheimer wait fourteen years for the most moderate recognition while giving such a writer as H. C. Witwer almost instantaneous acclaim. It calls Ellis Parker Butler

¹*Our America*, by Waldo Frank.

a great humorist and George Ade a mere fable writer. It proclaims O. Henry a prince of story writers and doesn't even know that the unfortunate Ambrose Bierce once lived among us. And the vast majority of priests and oracles in my profession persist in justifying and perpetuating this kind unkindliness and in instructing the new generation according to its tenets. Example par excellence: Speaks an instructor in story writing in one of our leading universities, in a critical and biographical survey of our short story writers, of "Robert W. Chambers, imaginative artist," and of Jack London, "at best a third-rate writer."²

The sum and substance of all we preach may be summarized in the one commandment we zealously enforce above all others: "Thou shalt not write anything an editor won't buy." Then we analyze what editors do buy, arriving, by the process of induction, at rules and regulations, which we promptly proceed to incorporate into textbooks for the unlettered. Some of our rules are flexible, others are not, depending solely upon the attitude of their compiler. An editor of a prominent periodical once outlined the qualifications that recommended a literary offering to him. He had set up before him an ideal reader, an imaginary lady with a family of daughters up in Vermont, and any manuscript submitted to him had to answer satisfactorily

² *Our Short Story Writers*, by Blanche Colton Williams, PH.D.

this mighty query: "Would the old lady want her daughters to read this?" If this editor happened to write a textbook for the instruction of the would-be story writer, the old-lady-and-daughters question would undoubtedly figure quite prominently therein. I am not aware of any textbook on the subject by this gentleman, but other writers have had this question, or similar ones, in mind in evolving laws for the would-be successful.

I admit that I have taught people to answer these mighty queries, before permitting them to entrust their precious wares to the Post Office. For most editors have a question of some sort— Will it please some imaginary old man, or country girl, or young parson, or the editor's own blue-eyed little girl, or, especially, his advertisers; and when a man or a woman pays hard-earned dollars for the information of how to "get by" the unfriendly editor, my professional ethics demand that I supply this information to the limits of my knowledge. Moreover, when a man or a woman hands in a story which has no earthly chance of being accepted by any magazine because it is burdened with a soul which violates every tradition and rule and policy by which magazines are governed, it becomes my duty to enlighten this student that his is not the way to "get by." For even such a student—an exception, to be sure—has read our advertising literature, has studied the popular psychology of success, and

often, like the other plodders, sincerely believes that a published story is a masterpiece, a rejected one worthless. If a story brings five dollars it is a poor one; if it brings fifty it is a good one; if it brings five hundred it is a work of art. Getting-by, then, becomes the supreme problem, and getting-by means having in mind the old lady with her daughters or the old man with the gout. And who can answer what becomes of poor Lafcadio Hearn's queer idea that

"Literary success of any enduring kind is made only by refusing to do what publishers want, by refusing to write what the public want, by refusing to accept any popular standard, by refusing to write anything to order"?

Poor, poor indeed!

CHAPTER II

ACTION

The very first rule our textbooks endeavor to impress upon the would-be story writer is that action must dominate his story. Whole chapters are devoted to the importance of this ingredient, bringing quotations from sundry editors proving beyond the merest suspicion of a doubt that action is the life and health of a story, the "punch" and "pep" and "pull" of it. Then follow chapters on how to capture action; on how to introduce it into one's own stories; on how to govern its course to the greatest advantage.

The editors quoted are, of course, all of the adventure and action type magazines. One is reputed to have stated his ideal beginning of a story to be something like this: "'He got up and looked at his watch. It was twelve o'clock. He went up into the garret and hanged himself.'" Another is said to like a more mystifying beginning, something like this: "'Who was the lady in 43? Was she the blond man's wife, sister or sweetheart? John couldn't sleep nights trying to find out.'" And still another gives his preferences, in the form of an

announcement of a contest widely advertised in professional magazines, for stories of "plot, of action, of interesting complication. Spend the sweat of your brow on deeds, not on acute character analysis; on big situations, on suspense and appeal, not in tedious description and fine writing."

The few editors who express preferences that conflict with this cry for action are not quoted. Here is one, for instance, who likes "realistic and psychological stories from writers who want to do for American life what Chekhov did for Russian life. 'Plot' fiction of the type desired by popular magazines is not wanted." But, then, there is the implication that his is not a popular magazine, and besides, he goes on to say that "our rates for fiction are very modest." And here is another editor who wants stories "that are characterized more by feeling and artistry than by 'punch.'" But who is she, for it is a she in this instance, to tell us what is wanted! Why, the circulation of her little periodical is so insignificant that she is hardly justified in having any wants at all! The fact that this little publication publishes some of the most distinctive stories written in America today does not count, of course. It is not a widely-read magazine; it does not pay for contributions;—it deserves no attention.

Plainly, our duty as instructors and moulders of the new generation of story writers is to base our instruction on the needs and preferences of the fic-

tion periodicals having the largest circulations and able to pay well for material used. The inculcation of literary ideals, the stimulation of original talent and the enriching of our national letters are all excellent themes for papers to be read before high-brow clubs and respectable societies, but as practical propositions, in a practical world, they do not lead anywhere. Any one who joins a class to take up story-writing as a profession wants to sell—and as quickly as possible. And the story that sells today the quickest and brings the fattest check is the story of action. Hence our first rule: "Spend the sweat of your brow on deeds!"

It is true that there do creep up some unpleasant contradictions in our methods. After laying down the law of action we refer students to Edgar Allan Poe or Robert Louis Stevenson or Maupassant for perfect short-story models, and they come back to us in a state of perplexity. They have picked up Poe and some garrulous old critic, in a superfluous introduction, had pronounced "The Fall of the House of Usher" to be Poe's best tale. They have picked up Stevenson, and some equally old-fashioned pedant had classed "Markheim" as a masterpiece. They have picked up Maupassant, and, again, some ancient scholar had lifted "Solitude" to a pre-eminent position. Yet not one of these three stories is particularly conspicuous for action. Poe seems to have spent the sweat of his brow in creating an

atmosphere of extreme morbidity (oh, terror-striking word in our optimistic texts!) ; Stevenson, on acute character analysis; and the insane Frenchman on some irrelevant prattlings about solitude and the whys and wherefores of this queer life of ours.

Occasionally some student with sufficient courage to voice his perplexity timidly inquires : "Would any magazine accept such stories today? There is so little action and still less optimism in them!" I think of all the stories I have read in recent periodicals that I can remember and am obliged to admit that few present-day magazines would be tempted to accept a story of the type on which the masters chose to lavish their best work. I think this estimate conservative, but soon the various anthologies of the best short stories that have appeared in our magazines in the last half dozen years leap into my mind and protest against my harsh verdict. Some sort of a change really has come over our fiction recently. Fully twenty-five per cent. of the stories in Mr. O'Brien's yearly collection, for instance, are decidedly not of the "rapid action" type, and more than seventy-five per cent. of the stories in such an anthology as that compiled by the late William Dean Howells would not stand the "action" test, although the latter anthology is not a very exact reflector of modern tendencies since but few living writers are represented.

So it becomes necessary to explain the discrepancy

between the type of story we teach our students to produce and the type of story we refer them to for study purposes. It becomes necessary to emphasize the fact that such periodicals as "The Little Review," "Midland," "The Pagan" (discontinued), "The Stratford Journal" (temporarily suspended), "The Wave," and a few others of the "unpopular" group do not pay for contributions and that the few "leaders" or "giants" in the group pay but little, and that, therefore, few "respectable" writers contribute to them. Of the youngsters that do make their way to the top, once in a great while, through the medium of these high-brow little magazines one or two may ever hope to get into the "Big Four" or similar high-presticed and well-paying periodicals. So that while it may be flattering to receive the pale encomiums of a few snobbish critics, the safest way is to write "real" stories full of red-blooded action and reap a golden harvest. Let those who do not care for the riches of a material world be satisfied with the deluge of praise poured upon a Sherwood Anderson; as for most, Holl-worthy Hall or Octavus Roy Cohen seems a more inviting model.

And if this does not really explain the uncanny discrepancy in our texts and they still seem somewhat confused and more than a bit contradictory, we can, as a last resort, have recourse to that eloquent dictum: Laws should be studied to be broken!

And we suddenly acquire the becoming halo of iconoclasts and have at last a satisfactory explanation of why our students should read Poe and Maupassant and Stevenson, yet not model their own work along the best of these masters; why they should study our anthologies full of such "anemic" stories as those of Dreiser, Anderson, Cabell, Waldo Frank, Ben Hecht, Djuna Barnes, and even those of Susan Glaspell and Alice Brown, yet not write in similar vein but should emulate rather writers whose names never appear in anthologies.

Having thus explained the validity of our first rule and having insisted on strict compliance therewith, we proceed to evolve methods for a satisfactory meeting of our rule. If action must dominate a story there should be some system of capturing this indispensable ingredient, of imprisoning it within our brief literary form, of whipping it into marketable shape. We find this system and reduce it to terse understandable terms. We dig down into our bag of story-lore and lo! we flourish before the weak eyes of the uninitiate another magic commandment: Complicate! Complicate if you would have Action in your stories. Complicate if you would have Suspense. Complicate if you would exchange rejection slips for checks!

It is true that we are careful to explain our schemes of complication, lest they be taken too

literally. Accompanying our commandments are various precautionary remarks about Logic and Plausibility and numerous other qualifying statements. But in the main Action and Complication are held forth as the two most important principles of sound story-writing. First of all, then, our students are urged to plot and complicate so that there be not a tedious moment in their product. Let every sentence move forward the action. Let new developments, startling in their unusualness and unexpectedness, crop up all the time. And don't forget to keep in reserve the grandest development of all, the most surprising, for the very end. The *Dénouement* is the thing! Charming word—French, you know.

I remember a young girl who attended my classes but a short time. "My weakness seems to be a lack of inventiveness," she confided to me. "My plots are too quiet." She handed in a story and I agreed with her. Her plots were quiet, but it was the quiet of Spoon River and Winesburg and Gopher Prairie. She knew intimately the little old Southern town she hailed from, and she had the gift of making me know it. I knew it in its past and present and future, which was all of one tone and texture; I knew its proud inhabitants, patrician and plebeian; I felt its pulse. I told the girl not to attempt to infuse plot into her story and suggested a number of magazines that might accept it as it was.

"But I don't want to write for these small publications!" she objected. "Nobody has ever heard of them. I want to get into the 'Saturday Evening Post,' the 'Cosmopolitan,' and the 'Red Book.' And they want more plot than I manage to put into my stories; that's what—told me." And she named a much advertised commercial critic.

Evidently I proved incapable of generating within her the coveted element of inventiveness, for the girl dropped out after an exceedingly brief stay and I have heard nothing from or of her since. Her name has not yet appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, nor in the *Cosmopolitan*, nor in the *Red Book*—nor, to my knowledge, in any other magazine. The eminent critic had done his work very well indeed. His teachings that *every* story must have an ingenious plot had seemingly struck root, and the girl with her plotless little town and its plotless little lives has probably decided, in utter despair, that her mind is hopelessly devoid of the one essential for successful story-writing—inventiveness.

Of course, she could have been made to stay and persevere a little longer, and perhaps she might have yet attained her modicum of success. If to her quiet little story a few entanglement tricks had been dexterously applied the girl would have been satisfied and probably also some editor or another of the more remunerative magazines to which she aspired. The aspect of her sleepy Southern town

would have undergone a strange metamorphosis, and her lethargic hero and heroine would have been changed into inhabitants of some hectic metropolis, but that, of course, would have merely proved the magic of sound technique.

One of the surest of these tricks of ours is the introduction of a second or third line of interest. Where a story is thin and uninteresting an entirely different story can be brought in and the two skillfully connected, related and correlated. Our texts abound in geometric diagrams of lines and curves and circles, bisected and intersected, zig-zagging, up and down, rising to various points of crises and climaxes and catastrophes, and falling again with the inevitable dénouement. These diagrams look like sacred hieroglyphics to the credulous student who approaches their cryptic meaning with a reverent awe. Given a story that reads too "narrative"-like, that lacks interest because too few crises are arrived at, and its weakness can usually be traced to its single line of interest which is not thick enough to generate the necessary amount of suspense. The introduction of another line brightens it up, adds suspense, complication—Interest.

The process really is a simple one. The moving pictures employ it, invariably, with greatest effect. A young man is leading the confident life of a freshman in some Middle-Western town. The first line is started. The young man's environment is pic-

tured, his habits and likes and dislikes and his towering ambitions. He is a marked man. But here his line breaks. The continuity writer has become busy introducing an entirely different line of interest. Beautiful Lady Psyche has left her shire castle and is sailing for America on the Mammoth liner. The orchestra is playing, and the Lady is standing on the upper deck, her delicate white hands grasping the railing. Her eyes are deep and wistful and hopeful. We know, of course, even at this time, that she will in some fateful way meet our unsuspecting freshman. It is only a question of time. Her career and his will become entangled and merged into one. In the meantime we are watching and waiting. But at this point the continuity writer again breaks the line and begins an entirely new one. On the liner is "Taffy" Slim and he is scheming to rob Lady Psyche of her famous jewels. Now we are watching Taffy's career. He succeeds and makes his get-away, but Lady Psyche's jewels are known the world over, having been photographed on numerous occasions for the rotogravure supplements of our Sunday newspapers, and Taffy finds himself unable to dispose of them. He wanders through the length and breadth of our land starving, with a fortune's worth of jewels in his pocket, until finally, he comes to our Mid-Western college town and meets our freshman. This clever hero buys the jewels for a bun and—oh, gallantry of

gallantries!—undertakes to return them to their beautiful heart-broken owner. Now we see how these three lines have been crossed and recrossed and why! We don't know yet what the gallant's reward will consist of but we hope it will be a proposal of matrimony; in fact, we are not willing to accept anything less for our hero.

In the short story this double-or multiple-line-of-interest method was employed most successfully by O. Henry and is clung to by most of his followers. Its skillful manipulation undoubtedly results in a more marketable product. It insures a thrilling sequence of events, if not always a logical one. It is one of our most venerated tricks. We underline it in our texts. We point out its potency in unmistakable terms. We hold it up as a shining revelation to a gasping novitiate, and for revelations the timeworn practice is to demand blind, absolute acceptance.

One result of our attitude has just been traced in the experience of the girl with her sleepy little Southern town story. The incompetent who cannot think in terms of criss-cross lines is eliminated. Artificiality is not only encouraged but placed at a premium. Sincerity and that highest of artistic qualities, simplicity, are held up as baneful stumbling blocks in the way of successful authorship. We may have read Joseph Hergesheimer but we have never heard of his philosophic Chwang-Tze whose

pithy sentence prefaces "Java Head," a sentence full of illuminating words: "It is only the path of pure simplicity which guards and preserves the spirit." By undermining the young story-teller's faith in the path of pure simplicity we undermine his spirit; we maim it; often destroy it completely.

Aside from the effect upon our story writers, this doctrine of constant action and complication and entanglement has also been one of the causes that have kept American fiction until very recently almost entirely in the cheaply Romantic school of the long-forgotten past. It has become strongly rooted in our readers through a perpetual diet of fiction that embodies these "vital" ingredients, and consequently also in our editors who must alertly watch the demand to engage successfully in its supply. As far as we are concerned it would seem that the great realists and naturalists have lived and died in vain. We are still writing largely fairy tales, American in color and setting to be sure, about bizarre adventures and quixotic adventurers. And in our institutions of learning we are still preaching that stories must be full of thrilling incidents and brave dénouements to be interesting and meritorious. We are still living in the fantastic land of improbable plots where men bound and rebound according to specific orders of the author. That "the value of a dramatic action has nothing to do with novelty of incident or the tingle of physical suspense"; that

"Character, motive and fatality, man and the earth and the gods—such are the elements of dramatic action,"¹ has, as yet, occurred to few of us.

An admission must be made: It is becoming increasingly difficult to find plot material that hasn't been worn threadbare by immoderate use. The South Seas and the Pacific Islands have been pretty well covered. Alaska and Hudson Bay are no longer inviting. The cow-boy story, though not yet entirely extinct, is fast becoming so. The crook story, though still popular with a particular type of magazine and magazine purchaser, requires a greater measure of ingenuity to be attractive. Base-ball and football heroism is still going strong but the market is limited. The Country-Boy-who-becomes-a-Wall-Street-magnate story will probably continue as long as the large business fiction magazines will retain their million-and-more circulation marks, but it is beginning to tax the writer's inventive capacity for brilliant deals for the hero to get to that crowded narrow thoroughfare below Brooklyn bridge. The rash-things-that-pretty-girls-do story is just now having its vogue, but will blow over like a Bill Hart or Douglas Fairbanks fame. The situation is gloomy indeed, even critical—if we wish to look at it that way. Many old writers as well as young ones admit it.

¹ *The Case of "John Hawthorne,"* Ludwig Lewisohn, *The Nation*, February 16, 1921.

But we don't. We are optimists. When cornered we say: "Yes, the present market does have some such aspect, but it simply proves one thing—the necessity for the greater mastery of technique, for more originality." Then we proceed to elucidate. We define originality. It isn't concerned with theme but with the handling of theme. There are no new themes under the sun; never were. A novel twist applied to a threadbare theme is originality. These twists can be learned—that's what we, teachers of technique, are here for: to show how. The secret lies not only in plenty of action and complication but in the spectacular handling of these elements. There are many ways of doing it effectively; plot order, for instance.

The common fault of the inexpert literary mechanician is that he usually tells his story in the chronological order. Assuming that his story presents a series of twenty steps, composed of incidents and episodes of varying intensity, he presents them all in the order of time of occurrence, thus obtaining a quiet narrative lacking in either suspense or "punch." But it is possible to juggle these steps in different ways so as to get them to unfold in a most dramatic sequence. It is possible to reverse this chronological order and begin with incident number twenty and work back to number one. That is, instead of narrating the crimes of our picaresque hero, which finally get him into jail, in the order of

commission, we begin with the man already safely tucked away behind the bars—it is nearly always a man; women get into jails but rarely in our fiction, except for the heart-rending scene of meeting their husbands or sweethearts—and then work back to his crimes and the day when evil was not yet in his heart and he was still attending the Y. M. C. A.

We may then use this “logical” method of plot order or we may use a mixed method or we may use any one of a number of variants of these methods. We may, for example, begin with step number five and run up to step number ten, then work in steps one to five and proceed with step number eleven. Or we may begin with step one, then skip number two, withholding it as a missing link in the chain for the sole purpose of intriguing the reader, and spring it after step nineteen. All we need to know is how to do these jugglings with the greatest possible skill—and this is where originality comes to the fore: in the play of craftsmanship.

This jugglery we can teach with an absolutely clear conscience. We can cite any number of great masters who have at various times employed these several schemes of plot development. Maupassant and Kipling and Stevenson and Poe and O. Henry and even the quiet Chekhov have all placed their stamp of approval upon these methods by employing them in their own celebrated little masterpieces. There is really no necessity to question whether

they came upon these methods consciously or intuitively, from within or without. This would raise the uncomfortable problem of synthetic and analytic processes, which would merely confuse the student and lead nowhere. There may be a distinction between incidents marshalling themselves in some inevitable sequence of which the author may not even be aware and incidents juggled about artificially by a writer who has had it impressed upon him that method A is more dramatic than method B. There may be a distinction; but for our purposes it is best not to consider it. Suffice us merely to point out that our story-construction lore is justified by the masters. The deductions are simple enough: Learn the tricks of the masters and be a master yourself.

I said we can teach plot legerdemain with a clear conscience. As for me, however, I have often shuddered to think what a zealous graduate might have done to such a story as Conrad's "Youth." In his or her deft hand it certainly would not have remained a mere "Narrative," told in the colorless chronological order; it would have become a finished short-story. Assuredly finished.

And yet it must be admitted that a skillful manipulation of our tricks is, after all, not so easily acquired. There is a brain and a temperament which is especially adaptable to them, but to the majority they remain an occult science forever

beyond their ken. These unhappy toilers cannot apply them to their labors. For most students are unable to construct the slightest kind of plot. There's a certain knack that must be acquired. The young, inexperienced mind must be disciplined along certain grooves. Most students seem to be unable to concentrate unless driven to do so. I experiment with my class. Unexpectedly I announce a theme and request the class to construct an incident. Like children bent upon solving a puzzle, they go to work and I am left to examine the result. Fully fifty per cent. have used the same situation and dénouement, as if by agreement; forty-nine per cent. have striven to inject a novel twist or "O. Henryism" at the end. But the one per cent! Why here is but a thin bit of paper, with just a few lines scribbled on it. If this is an incident, it is a very short incident, indeed. It reads: "I have never been able to write under pressure. I must find myself in a proper mood. I suppose I shall never make a story writer." I smile. I have a vivid picture of young Tommy Sandys losing his scholarship because one elusive word had refused to respond to his bidding.

CHAPTER III

“O. HENRYISM”

The mottoes of most of our fiction periodicals are told on their covers: “A magazine of clever fiction,” “A magazine of bright fiction,” “A magazine of entertaining fiction,” “A magazine of frisky fiction.” But with all the available supply of novel plot material exhausted by writers who had the good fortune of being here before our generation had an opportunity, what is left to us is neither clever, bright, nor entertaining. However, O. Henry proved that it was possible to take the same age-old material and brighten it up with a coat of sparkling cleverness. He had but to juggle his incidents in such a way as to make them follow one another in a most spectacular sequence. He had but to play upon the credulity of his reader. Like the stage magician, he said to his audience: “Observe that there is a tree here and a fountain there, and without moving a finger I shall reverse their positions. Now watch, presto! Here they are!” And the audience applauded, wondering how he did it, and crowned him king of the wizards.

The king of the wizards, then, occupies a most

honorable position in our textbooks. Stories written in the vein of O. Henry sell more readily than stories written in the vein of any other master. There is a brightness, a snappiness, a cheerfulness of style about them that draws the artistic sensibilities of editors. And yet our insistence upon the emulation of O. Henry has not produced many other O. Henrys. Perhaps it is because O. Henry went to the highways and byways of North and Central America for his plot material which he then juggled to his heart's content, while our students go to O. Henry for their plot material. Perhaps also it is because O. Henryism was as much a part of William Sidney Porter as was his speaking voice which is buried with him.

A very young student once lodged a complaint against her own unruly self. "It is absolutely impossible for me to write a single sentence in the O. Henry way," she said. "My stuff somehow doesn't have that swing—it's dead. I don't believe I shall ever learn. I am too sad of disposition, I suppose."

That was one time I did not smile. "Why should you want to write like O. Henry?" I asked. "Why don't you try to wear the shape of shoes or the color of clothes he wore, or drink the kind of ginger-ale he preferred?" But I was sorry later for my unguarded outburst, for I realize that that was not the way to make story writers, not the kind that sell, at any rate.

After all, O. Henry's technique consisted mainly of a series of clever tricks, and tricks can be taught, even though not perhaps his dexterity in performing them. His was truly a gift of the Magi and not really a gift of the gods. Admitting that through his superficial cleverness there occasionally glimmers an uncommon understanding of and a sympathy for the people whose destinies he juggles, the fact remains that his example is that of clever execution rather than artistic conception. It remains needless, then, for us to point to anything else in his makeup save his successful technique. We read a dozen of his stories, call attention to their brilliant mannerisms and surprising twists at the end, and exhort our students to go and do likewise. Sometimes we go a little further and discuss the underlying psychology upon which O. Henry based his loops and twists—his belief that our modern reader was so well-nourished on stereotyped fiction as to guess the conclusion of a story by its beginning, and, consequently, O. Henry led him on to believe that his guess was being borne out until the very end, when a pleasantly startling disappointment was sprung upon him.

To substantiate our eulogies of the wizard and to impress upon the would-be writer the importance of studying and emulating O. Henry, we quote copiously from Stephen Leacock, Prof. C. Alphonso Smith, and numerous other O. Henry friends. We

seldom, if ever, quote opinions of critics and editors who are hostile to O. Henry and his cult. Here is one editor, for instance, who actually believes that "the effects of such mannerism, trickery, shallowness, and artifice as distinguished O. Henry's work, are baleful on all literary students who do not despise them."¹ We know that this editor's opinion must not be credited with importance. His is only a small Greenwich Village publication. The checks that writers receive come from editors who do like O. Henry's ways; in fact, prefer O. Henry-esque stories almost to the exclusion of any other type. Hence we examine the work of our students with a feeling of satisfaction. By far the greater number have imbibed our teachings. Their work shows a striving after cleverness, witty flippancy, grotesque slang, and an attempt to cap the dénouement with a novel twist, a perfectly surprising turn. Thus we know that our work is not in vain; at least some of our students are on the way to success.

Again, this is not a plea on behalf of those incompetents who are not O. Henryesquely gifted and are therefore not on the way to success. It is merely a dispassionate consideration of the profession of teaching story-writing and its existing standards and ethics. Since the O. Henry story is held up as the supreme model, it is only fair to inquire into the

¹ Joseph Kling, editor of *The Pagan*, in symposium appended to "The Best College Short stories." The Stratford Company.

results thus produced. We have been so eloquent with pride on the progress of our short story. Since Professor Brander Matthews first expounded its philosophy, away back in 1884, and connected the two little words by a hyphen to distinguish this form beginning with an Initial Impulse and running up to a Climax and falling down to a Dénouement from the story which is merely short, it has become our prevailing form of literature. The quantity turned out annually is beyond the dreams of such a pioneer as Poe. But the quality—ah, that is another story!

What proportion of this wholesale output can be candidly, suppressing for the moment our desire to experience flattering sensations, added to our national literary treasury? How many memorable stories come to mind to waylay us with their poignant spell of subtlety and beauty—such, let us say, as Kipling's "Without Benefit of Clergy," or Chekhov's "Ward No. 6," or Maupassant's "In the Moonlight"? Few, isn't it? And peculiar, is it not, that though we have been heaping the warmest of praise upon Richard Harding Davis and Clarence Budington Kelland and George Randolph Chester and Richard Washburn Child and Mary Roberts Rinehart and a score or more of our other popular writers, the few memorable stories that do come to mind were not written by these favorites. How much of the O. Henryesque is to be found in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Revolt of Mother,"

or in Theodore Dreiser's "The Lost Phoebe,"² or, to take a more recent example, in Anzia Yezierska's "Hungry Hearts"?³ These stories are everything that the wizard's stories are not. They are neither breezy, nor flippant, nor surprising; nor "refreshing." Judged by our standards they are anomalies.

I am sufficiently steeped in our inspirational literature to be aware of the dangers of pessimism. The Doctors Crane and Orison Swett Marden and Walt Mason have left their effect upon my disposition. But it is only logical to deduct that if all the O. Henry standards that we have so triumphantly established and extolled for the guidance of our story writers have failed to produce a single great story to compare with the best that other countries which do not preach and practice O. Henryism have produced, there is something wrong with our standards. These are unusual times we are living in. Everything that has seemed to us wise and sound and sublime is coming in for a share of skepticism and revaluation. Unquestionable things are being questioned. Is it not a propitious time to attempt a revaluation of our short-story dogmas? What is the contribution of O. Henryism to our national letters and to the short story as a form of literary expression? How great an artist really was Wil-

² Both of these stories are to be found in William Dean Howells' "Great Modern American Stories: An Anthology." Boni & Liveright.

³ Houghton, Mifflin Co.

liam Sidney Porter, the founder of the Cult? Is it sacrilege to attempt to answer these questions?

O. Henry left us more than two hundred and fifty stories. In the decade before his death he turned out an average of twenty-five stories a year. Mr. William Johnston, an editor of the *New York World* relates* the struggles of O. Henry in trying to live up to a three-year contract he had with that paper calling for a story a week. There were weeks when O. Henry would haunt the hotels and cafés of New York in a frantic search of material, and there were times when the stories could not be produced on time and O. Henry would sit down and write the most ingenious excuses. Needless to state that O. Henry's stories bear all the marks of this haste and anxiety. Nearly all of them are sketchy, reportorial, superficial, his gift of felicitous expression “camouflaging” the poverty of theme and character. The best of them lack depth and roundness, often disclosing a glint of a sharp idea unworked, untransmuted by thought and emotion.

Of his many volumes of stories, “The Four Million” is without doubt the one which is most widely known. It was his bold challenge to the world that he was the discoverer—even though he gave the census taker due credit—of four million people instead of four hundred in America's metropolis that first attracted attention and admiration.

* *The Bookman*, February 1921.

The implication was that he was imbued with the purpose of unbaring the lives of these four million and especially of the neglected lower classes. A truly admirable and ambitious self-assignment. And so we have "The Four Million." But to what extent was he successful in carrying out his assignment. How much of the surging, shifting, pale, rich, orderly, chaotic, and wholly incongruous life of New York is actually pulsating in the twenty-five little stories collected in the volume?

What is the first one, "Tobin's Palm," if not a mere long-drawn-out jest? Is it anything more than an anecdote exploiting palmistry as a "trait"—to use another technical term—or point? It isn't New York, nor Tobin, nor any other character, that makes this story interesting. It is O. Henry's trick at the end. The prophecy is fulfilled, after all, in such an unexpected way, and we are such satisfied children!

What is the second story, the famous "Gift of the Magi"? We have discussed it and analyzed it in our texts and lauded it everywhere. How much of the life of the four million does it hold up to us? It is better than the first story; yes, much better. But why is it a masterpiece? Not because it tries to take us into the home of a married couple attempting to exist in our largest city on the husband's income of \$20 per week. No, that wouldn't make it famous. Much better stories of poverty

have been written, much more faithful and poignant, and the great appreciative public does not even remember them. It is the wizard's mechanics, his stunning invention—that's the thing! Della sells her hair and buys a fob for hubby's watch; while at the same time hubby sells his watch and buys her a comb. But you don't know all this until they get together for the presentation of the gifts, and then you gasp. We call this working criss-cross, a plot of cross purposes. In this story we usually overlook entirely one little thing—the last paragraph. It really is superfluous and therefore constitutes a breech of technique. We preach against preaching. Tell your story, we say, and stop. “Story” is synonymous with *action*. O. Henry didn't stop—so that even he was sometimes a breaker of laws. But this uncomfortable thought doesn't really have to be noted!

“A Cosmopolite in a Café” is a little skit proving that “since Adam no true citizen of the world has existed.” It is the type of writing that is termed “short story” by our humorous weeklies.

“Between Rounds” is the first story in the volume that really displays O. Henry's gift of mature satire. Here underneath his superficial jesting lurks reality. The pathos in the lives of the McCaskeys and the Murphys is touched upon, lightly to be sure, but sufficiently to indicate that O. Henry saw it.

The plotted happy ending with plenty of “punch”

is best exemplified by "The Skylight Room." The gullible reader must have really thought that Billy Jackson was little Miss Leeson's name of some star. But not so, ha-ha! It really was the name of the ambulance doctor who came to take her to the hospital. "Fishy," you say? Not any more than "A Service of Love." Not that the young couple in this latter story might not have both worked and concealed the fact from each other. But why both in a laundry and in the same laundry? Coincidence of course! Incidentally, can you recognize the "Gift of the Magi" here? Shakespeare may have never repeated, but O. Henry did, very frequently too. Here we have again the poor loving couple trying to get along on next to nothing a week. A slightly different twist but the formula is the same. Even the names of the principals are almost the same. In "The Gift of the Magi" we had Della and Jim, in "A Service of Love" we have Delia and Joe.

In "The Coming-out of Maggie" O. Henry again brushes real life and real romance. In the hands of a sincere artist this material could have been worked into an immortal story. As a matter of fact, the same basic theme—the heart-hunger of a neglected girl—has been treated by Gorki in his "Her Lover."⁵ And the difference between the two stories is the difference between tinsel and diamond.

⁵ See "Best Russian Short Stories," Modern Library.

“Man About Town,” “The Cop and the Anthem” and “An Adjustment of Nature” are trivial things—expanded anecdotes at best. “Memories of a Yellow Dog” presents O. Henry at his happiest. It is a fine bit of satire—a field in which lay his strength. In “The Love-Philtre of Ikey Schoenstein” the wizard again displays his bag of theatrical tricks. And so he does in “Mammon and the Archer,” with its needless anti-climax—again breaking the law: “Thou shalt stop when through.” “Spring-time à la Carte” is a long-drawn-out joke. So is “From a Cabby’s Seat.” In “The Green Room” O. Henry once more had a cursory glimpse of his “four million.”

Now we reach “An Unfinished Story.” Thanks to the good imps that may have influenced him to leave this story unfinished. It is the only one in the volume that shows O. Henry was capable of genuine emotion and had a sense of artistic truth. Dr. Blanche Colton Williams would not include it among O. Henry’s best because “It is just what the author called it—unfinished.”⁶ Yes, admittedly, it is unfinished—in a technical sense. The \$5 a week shop-girl has nothing to wear and does not go to the dance with Piggy. And that’s all that happens, except a little sermon at the end in which O. Henry intimates that the fellow that sets fire to an orphan asylum, and murders a blind man for his pennies,

⁶ “Our Short Story Writers.” Moffat, Yard and Company.

has a cleaner conscience than the prosperous-looking gentleman who hires working girls and pays them five or six dollars a week to live on in the city of New York. To "finish" this story would have necessitated the distortion of truth, the blurring of the drab little picture. That Sidney Porter refused to do it indicates to what extent he was above the practical standards of his admiring disciples and interpreters.

"The Caliph, Cupid and The Clock" is a bit of romantic clap-trap. So is "Sisters of the Golden Circle." "The Romance of a Busy Broker" is the old absent-minded-professor-who-forgot-he-was-married joke belabored to the dignity of a story.

"After Twenty Years" is another bit of writing that has been burdened with unqualified encomiums by the O. Henry clergy. The ingenuity of the plot and the strong "kick" at the end fill them with a halleluiah ecstasy. An empty little crook story, sketchy, anecdotal, is hailed as a masterpiece.

In "Lost on Dress Parade" you can again recognize the same old formula underlying the construction of "The Gift of the Magi" and "A Service of Love." Another example of criss-cross plotting. "By Courier" is a typical syndicate story. The woman the doctor had held in his arms was only a patient who had fainted. It was all a mistake. The Best Girl forgives and forgets. Nevertheless it represents an improvement over the old type of

similar story. The fair suspect was after all a patient and not the hero's sister.

"The Furnished Room" is another indication that O. Henry was capable of feeling the pulse of his four million when he was so attuned, and "The Brief Début of Tilly," though in smaller measure, corroborates it.

Thus an examination of O. Henry's work by any one not blinded by hero-worship and popular esteem, discloses at best an occasional brave peep at life, hasty, superficial and dazzlingly flippant; an idea, raw, unassimilated, timidly works its way to the surface only to be promptly suppressed by a hand skilled in producing sensational effects. At its worst, his work is no more than a series of cheap jokes renovated and expanded. But over all there is the unmistakable charm of a master trickster, of a facile player with incidents and words.

That William Sidney Porter was himself greatly displeased with his accomplishment, that he even held it in contempt is attested by his prevailing cynical tone. He knew he was not creating art, that he was not giving the best there was in him. There was not time for that and editors did not want it, and with a bitterness that Mark Twain and Jack London shared to their dying day he continued to perform tricks. Mr. William Johnston in his article in the *Bookman*, referred to above, states that after reading one of his, Mr. Johnston's, stories, in some

obscure Southern periodical, O. Henry wrote to him: "I wish *I'd* written that story." The story was probably not remarkable in any particular way. Mr. Johnston is not known as a great story writer. But O. Henry must have felt that it was written sincerely and his own artifice weighed upon him.

This is the lesson that an honest teaching profession with any critical vision at all, undertaking to mold a generation of fiction writers, ought to point out. Instead of worshipping him blindly, calling him the "American Maupassant," and quoting from his biographies painstaking proof that he was innocent of the crime of embezzlement for which he served a prison sentence, we might at least mention the danger of following his methods too slavishly. The puritanic impulse which inhibits any praise of a man's work unless it can first establish his "sterling" character is excruciatingly laughable if not downright pathetic. Thus attempts have been made by meticulous biographers to establish the fact that Edgar Allan Poe never tasted any sinful beverage. And only then, having vindicated his character, does the conscience of these brave biographers permit them to accept Poe as a great writer and the pride of America. Whether O. Henry was guilty or not does not change his standing as a story writer, nor his influence on other writers, and it is only as such that the student and critic is interested in him.

In our attitude toward O. Henry and O. Henryism lies one explanation of the prevailing mediocrity of the contemporary American short story. The conventional editor, teacher, student, and reader look upon the short story as upon some interesting puzzle, the key to which is cleverly concealed until the befuddled reader is ready to "give up." Our would-be writers seeking guidance from my profession are never disabused of this conception but deliberately encouraged to retain it. We overwhelm them with our analyses of the work of the Master, with our glowing tributes to his art and charm and genius, his purity of thought and his philosophy. An article on O. Henry, containing essentially the same material presented in this chapter, was rejected by a magazine circulating among young writers for the reason that "the editor does not hold your views with regard to O. Henry's contribution to the American short story. *He is our supreme short-story master....*" In not a single textbook on story-writing, of the many that have come to my attention, have I found such a simple estimate of O. Henry as this: "His weakness lay in the very nature of his art. He was an entertainer bent only on amusing and surprising his reader. Everywhere brilliancy, but too often it is joined to cheapness; art, yet art merging swiftly into caricature. Like Harte, he cannot be trusted. Both writers on the whole may be said to have

lowered the standards of American literature, since both worked in the surface of life with theoretic intent. . . . O. Henry moves, but he never lifts. All is fortissimo; he slaps the reader on the back and laughs loudly as if he were in a bar-room. His characters, with few exceptions, are extremes, caricatures. Even his shop girls, in the limning of whom he did his best work, are not really individuals; rather are they types, symbols. His work was literary vaudeville, brilliant, highly amusing; and yet vaudeville.”⁷

This estimate, coming as it does from a standard source, cannot be discounted by attributing it to radical or ultra-advanced tendencies. The fact is that the case of O. Henry is so simple that even standard critics and historians, if they but choose to be open-minded, can see through it. When in 1916 Mrs. Katharine Fullerton Gerould in an interview with the late Joyce Kilmer called O. Henry “a pernicious literary influence,” even the *New York Times*, though hastening to the defense of the wizard, admitted that there might be something in this outburst of depreciation of O. Henryism. “I hear that O. Henry is held up as a model by critics and professors of English,” said Mrs. Gerould. “The effect of this must be pernicious. It cannot but be pernicious to spread the idea that he is a

⁷ Fred Lewis Patee in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. II, p. 394. I find that Mr. Alexander Jessup has drawn on the same source on O. Henry in his Introduction to “The Best American Humorous Stories,” *Modern Library*.

master of the short story.” And the *Times*, in an editorial, although taking issue with Mrs. Gerould, was obliged to conclude:

“Maybe some day we shall get away from writing with a set of rules before us, and then we shall have literature instead of best sellers. Maybe the trouble with our writing is that we have developed technique to such a point that Tom, Dick and Harry are masters of technique and anybody who can get the hang of it can write a publishable story. Maybe our fiction has been whetted to a razor edge, until it is technique and nothing else. Maybe the story has been perfected until now we can tell perfectly a story that is not worth telling, but have not even thought of learning what stories are worth telling. Maybe, if we did that, and told them without thinking of technique and without knowing that there were any rules whatever, we might write stories that would be remembered, say, ten years hence. Maybe there is, after all, only one rule for telling a story—to have one worth telling and then to tell it as well as you can. Maybe that is what is the matter with the American drama as well as with American fiction. If we could unlearn some of the rules and forget technique we might not produce best sellers; and maybe if we told, as clumsily as our ignorance of the rules compelled us, stories that were worth telling, there might be no more best sellers, only stories that would live as

long as the clumsy plots of Dickens and the inartistic anecdotes of O. Henry."

Just how long O. Henry's stories will live and his influence predominate is a prediction no one can safely undertake to venture at this time. It depends upon how long we will permit his influence to predominate. The great mass of our reading public will continue to venerate any writer as long as our official censors continue to write panegyrics of him, and our colleges to hold him up as a model. The literary aspirants coming to us for instruction are recruited largely from among this indiscriminating public. Sooner or later, however, we must realize that the American Maupassant has not yet come and that those who foisted the misnomer upon William Sidney Porter have done the American short story a great injury. Before this most popular of our literary forms can come into its own the O. Henry cult must be demolished. O. Henry himself must be assigned his rightful position—among the tragic figures of America's potential artists whose genius was distorted and stifled by our prevailing commercial and infantile conception of literary values. Our short story itself must be cleansed; its paint and powder removed; its fluffy curls shorn—so that our complacent reader may be left to contemplate its "rag and a bone and a hank of hair."

When the great American short-story master finally does come, no titles borrowed from the

French or any other nationality will be necessary and adequate. His own worth will forge his crown, and his worth will not be measured in tricks and stunts and puzzles and cleverness. His sole object will not be to spring effects upon his unwary reader. His will be sincere honest art—with due apologies for this obvious contradiction in terms, for art can be nothing but sincere!—a result of deep, genuine emotions and an overflowing imagination. His very soul will be imbued with the simple truth, so succinctly put by Mr. H. L. Mencken, that “the way to sure and tremendous effects is by the route of simplicity, naturalness, ingenuousness.”⁸

⁸ Introduction to Ibsen’s “Master Builder, Etc.” Modern Library.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOVING PICTURES

An assignment once given my class called for a story based on this simple germ: "A servant kills his master." To my great astonishment I found that fully seventy-five per cent. of the class had decided, as if by agreement, that the servant must be either a Japanese or a Chinaman. Why? The students themselves could not explain it, but I could. I had observed this unison of plot conception many times before. They had all drawn their inspiration from the same inexhaustible source—the moving pictures. In all probability not a single student had ever employed or seen his or her friends employ a Japanese or Chinese servant. If they had ever employed a servant at all, it was most likely some negro girl, and yet their fancy had taken them to the Asiatics. For every one has surely noticed that in the moving pictures the lowly individual who carries the master's suitcase is always an Asiatic valet. It is fashionable and ethical. The laborer, the servant, is nearly always a foreigner, the American is the "boss," the domineering chap who wears the full-dress suit and faces the camera

with a compelling, clean-shaven chin. The drowsy members of our A. F. of L. and the weak-eyed bookkeepers and typists filling the galleries of our motion-picture houses must feel highly flattered as they applaud the shadows of their dreams projected on the screen. What has plausibility to do with the "Eighth Art"? And who is naïve enough to expect to find it there?

Yet to the student of the modern American short story, and novel as well, the moving pictures must come in for a great share of consideration. This institution exerts a tremendous influence on the trend of our fiction, determining both its form and substance. It is no longer a secret that most of our prominent fiction-writers who still are unattached to some studio are writing stories for the magazines with a view to their ultimate adaptation for the screen. A number of magazine publishers maintain brokerage departments where the stories appearing in their publications are sold to film manufacturers and the profits thus realized divided with the authors or quietly deposited to their own accounts. The editors of these magazines are instructed to keep an eye on moving-picture possibilities of manuscripts submitted to them. The remuneration involved is so alluring that even the best writers with high literary traditions behind them are fast succumbing. But whereas these old writers for the most part have al-

ready done their best work and have spent themselves, so that their loss to American letters is not very serious, the effect of the moving-pictures urge upon the young author is truly disastrous.

To write for the screen as it is at present managed requires neither art nor knowledge. Writers with any literary compunctions cannot hope to succeed in a field which demands a complete distortion of all values. What is required is the ability to supply some acrobatically inclined matinée idols and curly-haired *ingénues* with fast-moving vehicles to display their "stunts." It presupposes an intimate acquaintance with the peculiar talents of each star. If a star can swim and dive and ride horseback and jump off a running train and dance gracefully opportunities must be provided in the scenario for the parading of these talents. If another can wear pretty clothes daintily or has pretty dimples on her knees or looks particularly charming in the uniform of a maid or a governess the scenario writer must be governed accordingly in constructing his story. It is precisely because no one outside of a studio can have such an intimate knowledge of the abilities of the various stars featured by a producing company that staffs are employed to rewrite and prepare for production every script purchased from an outsider.

The moving-picture industry is almost entirely

dominated by investors who are as far from literature as the average would-be story writer is from being featured in the pages of the *Cosmopolitan*. Their concern is solely with the box-office. They will purvey anything that will yield the desired dividends. Manifestly to apply the word "art" to an industry with such mercenaries at its helm is to cover the word with mud, unless we stretch the term to include the art of making money. As Channing Pollock, in a "Plain Talk About the Movies,"¹ once said: "One of the troubles with the regular theatre is its conviction that the possession of a hundred thousand dollars turns a laundryman into a littérateur." The remark is still more pungently apposite to the cinema theatre. The ignorance of the rich investors controlling the destinies of the moving-picture industry is truly stupendous. An anecdote current among scenario editors and vouched for by one of them as an actual happening throws a pitiless light on this prevailing trait. When several years ago the craze of adapting Dickens' novels for the screen was on, the president of a large film corporation one day stormed into his scenario editor's office and demanded to know why Dickens' work had been permitted to go to a rival company. The editor defended himself by saying that some of Dickens' work could still be got. "See to it, then," the great man ordered. "Wire

¹ *Photoplay Magazine*, August, 1919.

Mr. Dickens that hereafter we want his entire output!"

And these intellectual giants are influencing the output of our Dickenses! The singularly few exceptions in the industry are powerless to change the state of affairs. They are either smothered by the great ones or are tolerated because they are so insignificant. And these great ones have decreed that adaptations of stage successes, old classics, best sellers, and magazine stories are more desirable wares than original stories written especially for the screen. The governing factor, of course, is the previous advertising that these adapted stories have had without cost to the film producers. Story values are the least consideration. Our public is so amusement-hungry and so well-trained that it will consume anything. Besides, the star is ninety per cent. of the show anyhow—people go to see the celebrated So-and-so rather than the vehicle in which So-and-so appears—otherwise the magnates would not pay five hundred dollars for a story and fifty thousand dollars for a star's performance in it.

The fact, however, that moving-picture producers are not purchasing original scenarios does not deter the numerous literary schools of the country from offering instruction in photoplay writing. The advertising matter of these schools is as optimistic as ever. "Makes \$50,000 a year by writing for the

screen," reads one headline. "Moving-picture stories in demand everywhere!" reads another. Then the information is generously volunteered that a certain scenario writer in a California studio is earning fifty thousand dollars a year; another twenty-five thousand; and countless others between five and ten thousand. Convincing proof is presented that no education or previous experience is necessary; that one farmer in the backwoods of Washington or Oregon or on the prairies of Illinois has sold a scenario for eighteen hundred and fifty dollars; that one woman who was never graduated from a public school has written a masterpiece in her spare time between cooking her victuals and tending to her seven children and an invalid husband, and that as a result of her exploit she has now paid off the mortgage on her house and is experimenting with the mechanism of a Dodge car.

This alluring prospect of becoming affluent via a course in photoplay writing is held out not only by the average correspondence school but also by not a few of our dignified institutions of learning. There is no excuse for offering any instruction in an art that is on such a low plane of development, except, perhaps, that of elevating it, which is not an aim avowed by any of these institutions; and, besides, mere honesty alone ought to compel even the most enterprising trustee or administrator to reach the simple conclusion that since the demand

for original photoplays is practically non-existent, as far as the novice is concerned, it is useless to manufacture photoplaywrights. The refusal to accept such a logical conclusion results in disappointments and heartaches and the upsetting of normal useful careers. A glimpse at the record of original scenarios purchased by some of our leading producers even as far back as 1918, when the policy of using adaptations only was not yet rigidly adhered to, proves conclusively the extent of the market. The American Film Company purchased only fifteen scenarios during the entire year. The National Studios—twelve. William S. Hart—eight. The Fairbanks Studio—six. The Dorothy Gish Company — four. Mary Pickford — one. The Chaplin Studio—one.²

When it is considered that some of our ablest fictionists and dramatists have been writing photoplays and that some of these accepted scenarios were written for particular stars and often sent direct to them or to their directors, the chances of the obscure novice, even the most meritorious one, are far from glorious indeed. And since 1918 the policy of adaptations only has been enforced more stringently—almost to the complete exclusion of the original script submitted by the outsider. A few producing companies have frankly admitted, in the various writers' magazines, that they do not

² E. M. Robbins, in the 1919 Year Book issued by *Camera*.

even read manuscripts submitted by unknown outsiders.

But while the great mass of aspirants may not be aware of the true state of conditions our more or less successful writers know it full well. The Authors' League and the Pen Women's League and the various Writers' Clubs throughout the country have all discussed and analyzed the moving-pictures market, and their members are taking means to meet its eccentric exactions. Why write a story in photoplay continuity or even detailed synopsis form only to have it returned from the Coast most likely unread, when the same material can be written up in a short story or a novelette, its serial rights sold to a magazine and its photoplay rights reserved and offered to a film company which is then sure to accord it a friendly reading? As a matter of record the price paid for photoplay rights to a magazine story is usually twice and sometimes tenfold the price paid for an original story written especially for the screen. Part of this extra compensation is probably for the advertising value of the story, and part for the judgment of the magazine editor which the film magnates are more inclined to accept than that of their own hired editors.

That fiction writers are taking advantage of this unusual opportunity to sell their work twice is an absolute certainty. "In fact, as several writers remarked at the Writers' Club dinner, a large per-

centage of the present-day magazine stories are written—planned and plotted—with the screen directly in mind. . . . It is well known, on the inside of the game, that successful fictionists plan every situation and bit of dialogue in certain stories, visualizing, as they write, the way those situations will, as they hope, work out on the screen.”³ And again: “Today, among the more successful writers of action-stories for the magazines, there exists the feeling that it is a criminal waste of time to write originals for the screen. · Their method is deliberately to plan their fiction . . . so that it will actually contain abundant photoplay material, while yet being properly balanced up with the necessary word-painting and dialogue which good fiction demands. In other words, they systematically plan their fiction to make its picture possibilities ‘hit the producer in the eye’ the first time he—or his scenario editor—reads it. . . . Almost nine-tenths of the pictures shown today are adaptations of successful fiction stories or stage plays. If you doubt that, watch the productions in your theatres and note their origin.”⁴

What this “systematic planning” results in is self-evident. The moving-picture story and the fiction story are two different products. Their technique is different. The photoplay is panto-

³ Arthur Leeds in *The Writer's Monthly*, April, 1919.

⁴ Arthur Leeds in *The Writer's Monthly*, May, 1920.

mime pure and simple. Ideas and emotions can only be expressed by means of gestures and facial contortions, with the aid of a schoolboy subtitle flashed on the screen. Literary style, psychologic delineation, and nice subtleties of thought and emotion cannot be transmitted. The plot must unfold rapidly and teem with surprising and tense situations. The actors must have something *to do* every second. To write a fiction story with photoplay possibilities requires a careful selection of theme and plot. Unlike the magazines, which run in types, each catering to a particular group of temperamental and intellectual stratum of our people, the moving pictures depend for success upon the approval of the Ladies' Auxiliary Society and the Chew Tobacco Club of Dead Hollow as well as upon Greenwich Village and the bourgeois Philistines of our metropolises. No theme must be used that might give offense to any of these patrons; all must be kept satisfied so that a continuance of their patronage may be insured. It is also apparent that the pale, quiet story which does not depend upon action for its "punch" must be entirely sacrificed, since it cannot possibly have any moving-picture adaptability. Only the swift-moving, red-blooded plot can be utilized.

Needless to suggest that our story writers are well aware of these limitations. The fact that their work is adapted almost wholesale into photo-

plays speaks eloquently for their knowledge on this score. Needless to suggest, also, that they have become expert mechanics in the way of constructing a fiction story so that it will be certain to "hit the producer in the eye." They have learned that "the photoplaywright depends upon his ability to *think* and *write* in action."⁵ And they have learned to think and write in action. They have also taken to heart the dictum regarding theme. "In selecting your theme, ask yourself if either dialogue or description may not be really required to bring out the theme satisfactorily. If such is the case, abandon the theme. The few inserts permitted cannot be relied upon to give much aid—the chief reliance *must* be pantomime."⁶ It is only natural, then, for our writers to eschew the unadaptable theme altogether.

That the bulk of our magazine fiction is, therefore, not magazine fiction at all, but merely disguised moving-picture stories is a fact that has found entirely too little general publicity. A moving-picture story differs from a fiction story not only in matter of technique and theme barred by limitations of technique but also in many other respects. As we have seen, because of the general appeal of the moving pictures certain themes that might offend any part of the great public must be

⁵ *Writing the Photoplay*, Esenwein and Leeds.

⁶ *Ibid.*

avoided. Obviously this results in the humiliating condition of degenerating to the standard of the lowest patron, of courting his approval as the final goal of successful authorship. But should, perchance, an author with a virile conscience bolt the ranks of the meek conformists and yet, by dint of extraordinarily fortunate circumstances, break through with his product, the power of the various Boards of Censorship must be reckoned with.

There are, of course, official, semi-official and unofficial censors presiding over the production of our magazine fiction, too. But while a revolting author may take his work to some less respectable magazine and thus save his soul, no such outlet exists for the photoplaywright. His work must be so harmless that it will pass not only the National Board of Censorship but also the various State and city boards, otherwise no enterprising producer will risk his money producing it. The experienced photoplaywright, then, studies the proscriptions of the various boards and keeps himself informed of all their decisions. He knows, for instance, that crime must be treated cautiously, and it must always be punished in the end; that the National Board will not pass a picture in which there is a suicide, that burglary may be shown, but not by what means it is committed; that flirtations with women of easy virtue are banned; that lynching scenes are permissible only when the picture is laid in places

where no other law exists; that scenes showing kidnapping do not always "get by"; that elopements must be handled delicately; that, in short, the effect of the picture on the young, the evil-minded, and the weak-minded must always be carefully gaged.

The experienced photoplaywright also knows of all important precedents established by the censors. He knows that Shakespeare's plays have not gotten by unscathed; that "Macbeth" was deemed too full of crime and "Romeo and Juliet" too full of love; that a kiss between the two youngsters in the latter play was limited to three feet; that Eugene Walter's "Easiest Way" could not be exhibited in the sovereign State of Pennsylvania because the Board of Censors of that State had condemned it "in accordance with Section 6 of the Act. . . . Because it deals with prostitution"; that in O. Henry's "Past One at Rooney's" such sub-titles as "At one end was a human pianola with drugged eyes," and "I know how bad it looked—me smokin' and comin' in here. But I'll promise you, Eddie—I'll give up cigarettes and stay home every night if you want me to" were deleted; etc., etc. And above all he knows that religious and political views must never be expressed. Furthermore, that if he breaks the last law and does essay to express any views at all, they must be the worn-out popular views that even the humblest deacon or the mistress of the little red schoolhouse back home might be gladdened with,

because they have been cherishing them as an heritage from their ancient forbears.

Thus the influence of the moving pictures on the bulk of our magazine and even book fiction. It is a moving-picture fiction, "strong," fast-moving, startling, full of cheap ideas and a gushy hackneyed idealism, written largely by photoplaywrights who use the fiction medium simply because it enables them to exact a higher price for their product, and catering to a photoplay public. For this moving-picture influence extends not only to the makers of stories but to the general reading public as well. It tames it, if indeed it need any taming, molds it, forms it into a hardened cast with a definite æstheticism which it carries from the cinema house to *Happy Stories* and *Virile Stories* and *Goody Stories* and back again. There are traditional themes, traditional views and a traditional treatment, in spite of the loud cry for novelty, and any theme, view or treatment violating the tradition, should it succeed to get by the vigilantes higher up, has to brave a combat with this traditional moving-picture taste.

The young story writer, like his more mature brother or sister, is infected with this influence and from the very beginning of his career looks askance at any doctrine that conflicts with his proud æstheticism. But in our profession it is seldom that he is required to be false to the culture of the screen.

Our textbooks and the bombastic dogmas they largely exploit are themselves for the most part a product of the same culture. He is told to think in terms of action rather than in terms of idea and character. He is trained in the construction and management of situation and incident until, although not consciously intending to, he is able, like his more successful colleagues, to turn out passable photoplay material. Small wonder that most of our short stories abound in wooden characters, clumsily moving about on well-oiled springs, thinking stereotyped thoughts and talking wooden dialogue. The atmosphere fanning upon them has the hot fetid tang of the darkened-theatre air.

When told to write a story the student almost without hesitation betakes himself to his supreme source for plot material. It matters little that this material itself merely represents the adaptation of some fiction story. The moving pictures today could be used as another illustration of Emerson's theory of circles, or is it merely a modification of the delightful pastime of see-saw of which we were so fond in our childhood? The scenario writer adapts the magazine story and the magazine story writer adapts the photoplay story, etc., etc., ad infinitum. Of course the disguising twist often goes with it, but the material nevertheless basically remains the same. And, as a matter of fact, from the point of view of salability the method is not

without merit, everybody involved—the scenario editor, the producer, the public—recognizes in the revamped material an old friend, and, if the revamping has been done dexterously and ingeniously, glories in its novel familiarity. The failures employing this method are confined mainly to two classes of students—those who are temperamentally entirely out of tune with the moving-picture traditions, a small minority to be sure, and those who, though favorably attuned to the spirit of the silver sheet, fail to acquire the knack of giving their work the necessary disguising twist which passes for the much-vaunted novelty.

Admitting that it would be extremely difficult and perhaps even futile to attempt to wean the young student-majority away from the well-assimilated influence of the show house, one cannot avoid speculation upon what could be made by a serious-minded critical teaching profession of the open-minded minority diffidently seeking encouragement in their desire to follow newer traditions or to give birth to still newer ones. If for one chapter in our texts or for one semester in our institutions of learning the joy of creating for the mere love of it, for the sheer beauty of it, had been glorified as we glorify popularity and commercial success, what a buoyancy of spirit we could have engendered, what a fluttering of young wings!

For two years in succession a young woman came

to my classes and each year she dropped out before the expiration of the term sending me a note of despair. She had traveled extensively through Europe and the Orient as well as through North and South America and she had accumulated a fund of experience to draw on for material. She tried hard to imprison it in story form but the finished product lacked thrill and suspense and airiness. She received nothing but the cold platitudes of printed rejection slips, while other students—as innocent of any knowledge of life as a fluffy ingénue capering through five reels of silent drama—who modeled their work along the lines of *Popular Stories* and the *Jolly Book Magazine* and the latest releases, and seasoned it with a generous dash of O. Henryism, occasionally displayed fair-sized checks. She worked away despondently and each succeeding story tended to prove that the text we were using and the current magazines we were studying were helping her but little. There was a heaviness, almost an eeriness, permeating her work, and yet it was a heaviness somewhat akin to that which permeates the work of Thomas Hardy. She admitted that most of the magazines we were studying bored her, that she preferred "Beyond the Horizon" and "John Ferguson" to "Irene" and "The Passing Show." I advised her to write sombre tragedy, yes, morbid stuff. She produced a passably good story. It was rejected by the first

magazine she sent it to with a personal letter expressing the editors' regrets at their inability to accept such an interesting story, but they never purchased "depressing" material. Wouldn't she be kind enough to let them see something else of her work, something in much lighter vein? She refused to try another market, insisting that she had known all along that she could not write. All the writers' magazines she had read and even our own textbook declared most emphatically that "morbid" stories were not wanted. She discontinued her studies.

The next year she came back. "I can't help writing," she apologized. "I simply can't resist the impulse to write. I don't care if I don't sell, I am going to write just for myself—whatever I like. I merely want you to see what I am doing." A few months later she sold a tragic little tale to an unpopular little periodical. But she did not take advantage of this, her first success. Soon her work began to show labored flippancy and attempted ingenuity, and it looked ludicrously pathetic—a Hawthorne austerity with an H. C. Witwer lightness; the combination was irritably grotesque. Before the end of the year she dropped out again. And now she is back once more. Whether she will ever be able to cut away entirely from the cords of a moving-picture impulse only time can tell.

This case is a mild example of the struggle now waged with a sinister environment alien to all liter-

ary aspiration except for immediate gain by many lonely souls. Their resistance could be materially strengthened by sympathetic guidance. Contrary to the proverbial jibes of the cynics the literary aspirant is far from possessing an over-abundance of confidence. Intelligent persistence is a rare quality, not to be found among too many. The mediocre aspirant either soon deserts the ranks or begins to turn out salable wares. And the person with a genuine case of divine afflatus also either leaves the ranks with a curse in his heart or finally learns to turn out regulation material and becomes a cynic for life. Cynicism may be a much more admirable attitude than open-mouthed subservience, but it is not always conducive to sturdy accomplishment. Often it is a sense of surrender. And since missions seem to be such a popular necessity among our pedagogues and literary clergy, what could be a more worthy one than the saving of these lonely strugglers from life-long cynicism? But that requires, first of all, an intelligent and fearless weighing of the forces on either side and the rolling up of greater support on the side of the weaker. Truth and spontaneity are struggling against stifling commercialism and artifice; against a hostile environment resting complacently on old dilapidated dogmas, and chuckling contentedly with its moving-picture standards of life, art, and literature,—its moving-picture civilization.

CHAPTER V

VERBOTEN

The field of the short story is first of all the field of the magazine. To be a successful story writer requires a comprehensive knowledge of the policies and preferences of the various periodicals that buy stories. It is natural to assume that literary agents, commercial critics, and teachers should be well aware of these editorial policies and preferences, and should make every effort to inspire the amateur with the respect and deference due such essential knowledge. We use this knowledge to stem any inclination to mischief. We hold it aloft, over the heads of the unmanageable ones, threatening them with failure, unless they become manageable. Thus we preserve the dignity of the profession and help stragglers on their weary pilgrimage to the golden calf.

For us the task is after all an easy one. It is but necessary to tabulate the good old taboos as to the content of our stories and then be-write and be-lecture them to make our words impressive. We do that in our teaching of photoplaywriting; we do it in the teaching of fiction-writing. But no one has ever

seriously labeled the photoplay as it is finally produced on the screen as a form of literature, while our fiction undeniably is a form, if not *the* form, of our national literature. It behooves us, therefore, to bring forward all the pomp and pride and glory we are capable of and point out the peculiar characteristics that distinguish our fiction as a national product from the fiction of other nations. And we usually find it more advisable to do it by the negative method of pointing out what our fiction is not rather than by the positive method of pointing out what it is. Crystallizing the more-important undesirable and therefore absent elements in our fiction into single words, we can say that it is not *pessimistic*; that it is not *lewd*; that it is not *irreverent*; that it is not "*red*"; that it is not *un-American*.

This does not mean that our literature abstains from all discussion of the topics of pessimism, sex, religion, politics and economics, and Americanism. It is merely the extent to which they are discussed and the angle of discussion that elevate our fiction to a position of what passes for national expression. Like the vicious circle that governs photoplay scripts—adaptation of fiction stories being adapted in turn from the screen and re-adapted back again into scripts—our opinions on the phenomena of life are adaptations of the opinions imprisoned within covers of best sellers and our million-and-

more-circulation magazines, only the circle is somewhat more complicated. Scripts are written to meet the prejudices of all moving-picture patrons; stories, to meet the needs of a particular type of reader. And this much must be said for our magazines: The variety of types has made possible whatever untrammelled literature we have. For after all there is a wide difference between the moral tone of *Harper's* and the arch-sophistication of the *Smart Set*, or between the big-business glorification of the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *New Success* and the artistic quiet and rebelliousness of the *Dial* and the *Little Review*.

Whatever untrammelled literature we have, however, is little enough. The tone-givers, the guides, the molders are the magazines of power with public opinion and millions of dollars behind them, with unbreakable traditional prejudices and taboos. And so long as the humblest critic and the highest-paid institutional authority unite in upholding these traditional taboos as glittering marks of Americanism, public opinion will continue to demand a literature that is for the most part infantile, insipid and lifeless. The generations that rise to pound the typewriter keys in the production of stories are for the most part imbued with this negative conception of our literature and unquestionably the most dangerous instrument for the perpetuation of this degrading conception is the literary teaching profes-

sion. Again, in not a single textbook on story-writing have I been able to find an intelligent, fearless analysis of our national taboos and their effect of sterility upon our literature. I have found warnings and admonitions and scarecrows. "Thou shalt not!" is the sum and substance of our learned attitude on these mummifying influences. The vacillating feet of the aspirant are directed toward the proper, well-trodden roads at the very outset, and the punishment for straying is stressed to the point where it requires a superhuman courage to brave it.

1. *Optimism*

Our first dictate is "Thou shalt not be morbid!" Depressing stuff may be characteristic of the Russians, the Germans, the French, the Italians, the Scandinavians, but not of the Americans. Ours is a young country, a free country, a happy country, full of the joy of existence. Ours is a hopeful people, cheerful and gay and proud; glad to be alive. "People have all the gloom they want," says the editor of *The American Magazine* in his "Fourteen Points" to contributors. "They manufacture it on their own premises. You cannot sell them gloom. What they want to buy is a cure for their gloom. They don't want to buy more gloom." And Dr. Frank Crane in his ever-buoyant style exclaims:

"The Saturday Evening Post and The American Magazine have what I call 'good literature.' "¹

Since salability is the only criterion of worth, any story that violates our fundamental optimistic tone is at once intercepted, revamped, "improved" or pronounced hopeless and condemned to extinction. "Not salable," is a phrase as ominous as a jury's "Guilty!" on a charge of murder in the first degree, and the only appeal possible is for the defendant to plead a sudden seizure of passionate desire to "pack up his troubles in his old kit bag and smile, smile, smile!" And so the law of supply and demand operates once more. The "calamity howler" is eliminated and the man or woman with the "smile that won't come off" gets to the top. American literature becomes enriched by the advent of another "genius" imbued with the gospel that "life is great fun, after all!"

That no literature can thrive on such a barren optimism seems to be a statement so obvious as to challenge even the mere ordinary intelligence offering it. Yet pedants carry forward this optimism-tradition and preach, and lecture, and prate about the spirit of America, and threaten and punish and outlaw the few unfortunate rebels. What literature can a country produce which refuses to take even the most timid peep at life as it is, which

¹ Dr. Frank Crane to the Literary Novice, *An Interview. Writer's Monthly*, January, 1921.

shuts its eyes in very horror at the most fundamental problems of the land, which does not brood, contemplate or inquire, which does not know the benediction of a tear or the relief of a sigh? Can a steady diet of sugar produce anything more invigorating than diabetes? And literary sugar is what we think and preach and worship. All heroines are pretty; all heroes succeed; all complications are solved; wedding bells ring; promotions are given out; only bad people die young; the good live to a mellow age of four score and ten; life is a fairytale in which all the fairies are sweet young things waving magic wands over honest young brokers of their choice; the world, and America especially, is a Vale of Tempe where limousines are passed out as the reward of virtue and endeavor and where successful matches are consummated.

Our writers must be either inanimate machines or sorry human beings trained to suppress their instincts and moods. They must be on their guard not to succumb to the "blues"; quick to inhibit any sad reflection or discouraging thought. "If you can't see the sun is shining," wrote one editor very bluntly, rejecting a "depressing" story, "take Epsom salts and sleep it over." And whether they are drowsy or not, sleep it over our writers must. Those who suffer with insomnia find their good neighbors either snoring peacefully or stamping about in infuriated protest. Our writers must sift their

experience; if it is tragic or insufficiently uplifting they must dispatch it to oblivion. It is really most advisable not to draw upon experience at all. Not of such stuff can optimistic fiction be made. For is there life without tears and heartache and doubt; without innumerable deaths of precious fragile dreams; without graying of heads; without perplexity? Hence arises what Van Wyck Brooks calls "the doctrine of the fear of experience. . . . It assumes that experience is not the stuff of life but something essentially meaningless; and not merely meaningless but an obstruction which retards and complicates our real business of getting on in the world and getting up in the world, and which must, therefore, be ignored and forgotten and evaded and beaten down by every means in our power."²

Here again the inconsistency in our theory of optimistic fiction is glaring. We shriek anathemas at any native product that repudiates it, yet we bow with respect to importations. We acclaim all the morbid geniuses of Europe; we accord their works places of special privilege in our curricula; we consider it a mark of culture to mention the titles of at least a half-dozen depressing books. Even our most respectable magazines are proud on occasion to publish a story by an eminent European author with the flamboyant legend placed upon it or boxed in the center of its first page by the editor: "No

² *Letters and Leadership.*

one but Gorki (or Maeterlink, or D'Annunzio, or D. H. Lawrence, or whoever else it might be) would have the courage to write a story such as this, and no magazine in America but *The*——— would have the courage to publish it." The same legend is placed sometimes upon the work of a native writer, but after reading the story one finds that either the writer did not dare, after all, or that the editor of the brave magazine edited the contribution; that both the writer and the worthy editor had been so frightened at the mere flap of a wing that they had to offer an apology for attempting to soar.

This inconsistency is particularly reflected in our current criticism and literary textbooks. With the same breath a reviewer will praise Dostoyevski and chastise some native youngster for his horrible morbidity. In the same chapter the text will refer to Chekhov and Maupassant and Zola and Poe with almost cringing reverence and eloquently preach the gospel of cheap optimism as the supreme message of the story writer. And the young would-be procures copies of the great masters, reads them, and comes back perplexed. "Why do *they* write about such horrid things?" asks one young student. I look into her large, innocent eyes and smile. The Great Creator must have been in a diplomatic mood when he invented a smile. I glance down at my copy of *The Literary News*, lying on my desk and note that an editor of a prominent and liberally-

paying magazine is in the market for "stories of rapid action—cheery short stories, encouraging, helpful—the kind that makes the world better," and I proceed to discuss how this kind of story is written. . . .

2. *Sex*

Of all our taboos none has contributed so large a share in keeping our literature swathed in baby blankets as that on sex. In its essence it is merely a direct irradiation of taboo No. 1 on optimism. If everything in the universe is good and beautiful and holy and the writer's business is to chant incessant halleluiyahs, then sex is all of these and must be treated reverently. Its unsavory aspects as well as those leading to unhappiness must be passed by, and since in the muddled world we are living in sex has felt most severely the combined forces of bigotry, suppression and inhibition, of pathologic social and moral conditions, its aspects are most frequently unsavory and unhappy and therefore must be either ignored entirely or made savory and happy. We have a hoary phrase perpetually playing upon our glib lips—it is to the effect that we are a "clean-living, moral people." The phrase itself has long lost its meaning, even to the most uninformed of citizens, but it has remained a sacred fetish forever, it seems.

Again it is not in the total abstaining from any

treatment of sex that our taboo is expressed, but in our peculiar angle of treatment. Total abstaining were indeed impossible, for any literature, and least of all for our literature. The truth is that ours is, in the main, essentially a sex-literature—largely because of our “reverent” attitude. Strong elemental forces long suppressed erupt in irrepressible, if furtive, curiosity. No country on earth can boast of as many periodicals specializing in the risque, the sexually-sensational, the cheaply suggestive, as the land of the “clean-living.” The fact is incontrovertible. Where there is a continued supply there must be a continued demand. Our publishers know their market. Even the titles of a host of our periodicals exploit, not too artistically, this crude reaction of a sex-conscious people. “Saucy Stories,” “Breezy Stories,” “Snappy Stories,” “Live Stories,” “Droll Stories,” “The Parisienne,” “True Stories,” “The Follies,” “Telling Tales,” “Secrets,” “I Confess,” “True Confessions,” “High Life,” “Hot Dog,”—these are some of the titles that wink mischievously at the purchaser timid with guilt. But the purchaser is rarely pleased with his dissipation. He finds the wine exceedingly mild. Most of the stories under the suggestive cover bearing the inviting title and a still more inviting pretty girl, usually attired in very becoming *négligé*, are, after all, “clean.”

And this “cleanliness” is the characteristic blight

of nine-tenths of our entire literature. It is vulgar with the lowest kind of sex-consciousness but it doesn't go "too far." It is the "cleanliness" of our moving pictures. Is there any reason why a production entitled "Du Barry" in Europe should be rechristened to read "Passion" for American exhibition? Is there any reason why Barrie's "Admirable Crichton" should become "Male and Female" as a photoplay? Is there any reason for such titles as "Sex," "The Restless Sex," "His Wedded Wife," "The First Night," "The She Woman," "The Leopard Woman," "Wedded Husbands," "Why Wives Go Wrong," "Forbidden Fruit," "The Primrose Path," "What Happened to Rosa," "Why Change Your Wife?" "The Woman Untamed," etc., etc? It surely does not require an erudite psychoanalyst to find the reason for this avalanche of suggestiveness.

Perhaps, if they deemed it wise to speak, our motion-picture producers could shed some light on the subject. Seemingly their opinion of our "clean-living, moral people" is not very flattering. And their judgment is substantially founded upon the generous reports they receive from the distributing exchanges.

Here, too, carefully as the titles are selected the pictures themselves are "clean." If they were not, the various Boards of Censorship would have seen to it that they become so. At most a director will

manage to show the heroine plunging into her morning's rose-water bath, as in "Male and Female," for instance, or an exotic harem partially disrobing for a cold dip into the perfumed waters of the Rajah's pool, as in "Kismet." Whether the scenes are vitally necessary to the unfolding of the plot is immaterial. They constitute an irresistible attraction in themselves, and must be smuggled in, if possible. A couple of feet of nakedness results in thousands of dollars' worth of advertising.

What is true of the moving pictures is equally true of our spoken stage. Think of "Twin Beds" and "Up in Mabel's Room" and "Parlor, Bedroom and Bath" and "Mary's Ankle" and "Nightly, Nighty" and "Scrambled Wives" and "Ladies' Night in a Turkish Bath" and "Getting Gertie's Garter" and the various "Follies" and "Scandals" and a hundred-and-one other titles which were surely chosen for a purpose—the same purpose which impelled some years ago the manager of the old Academy of Music in New York to advertise a stock company production of Daudet's "Sapho" as the "greatest immoral play ever written." And again the plays themselves are not remotely as licentious as the titles would intimate.

What, then, is this "cleanness" of ours? What are its impositions and how far can they be stretched? The answer is simple and more than a trifle sad. Our "cleanness" excludes serious

thought. "Something audacious suits us, but nothing salacious," writes one editor of a well-known publication of the frothy type. "Salacious" stands for thought, reflection, analysis. A little suggestiveness, a hint, a double-edged joke, a farcical situation, a vulgar thrust, will do. But a deep, sincere analysis, a fearless uncovering of a cowering conscience—that is salacious, immoral, lewd, unclean. That accounts for the free and open dissemination of so much debasing, lurid stuff and the hypocritical suppression of Dreiser and Cabell. That accounts for the popularity of Bertha M. Clay *et al.* and the unpopularity of Sherwood Anderson *et al.* Sex is a fit subject to jest about, to inject breezily as a gently-naughty stimulant. Sex as an elemental force which shapes the lives of men and women, which actuates their struggles in this terrestrial sphere of ours, making for success or failure, for happiness or despair, for sinner or saint, is vile, lascivious, and therefore taboo.

The literary teaching profession has not passed this degrading scene unnoticed. It has broken up in two camps. The great mass of instructors have simply adopted the position that a writer must give whatever is demanded of him. Would a tailor refuse to accept an order calling for a fabric he personally does not approve of and a fashion he detests? Granted that this is not a particularly lofty conception of literary art, it is still less pernicious than the other extreme.

cious than the conception held by the smaller group of so-called idealists in the profession. To these the sex aspect of our literature calls for stormy denunciation. They would impress upon the future writer the sanctity of his mission. The pen must not be polluted. Sex must be left alone entirely. The moral tone must be preserved in all productions. Laws for the ruthless suppression of the unclean must be fought for and their enactment obtained.

What these honest Puritans cannot understand is that the entire class of bawdy, sex-reeking literature is a product of the very laws they have been fortunate enough to have enacted; that the complete abolition of these laws and the absolute cessation from persecution in the interests of morality of any expression of sex would purge our literature of the curse as nothing else. If any one could purchase a mature, intelligent literary expression of the mysterious passion that animates nature and moves the world, the profane effusions of shriveled minds would appear shocking and abhorrent by comparison. All literature that has ever been written has dealt directly or indirectly with the relation of men and women—for the very trite reason that all life that has ever been lived has been the life of this relation of men and women. To place the yellow ticket of evil upon this relation as a literary subject is to degrade it beyond words of contempt. The prevailing spectacle of our literary sewage is

perfectly natural: the thought of uncleanness wrapped around the stuff of life is bound to pollute it.

But the pernicious influence of this immoral taboo goes beyond its direct inhibition of the most legitimate of themes. It perpetuates an æsthetic literary tenet which is a relic of the Age of Darkness. It is to the effect that the morality or unmorality of its contents determines the value of a literary production. "It is a shame that such splendid writing should be wasted on such an atrocious theme," said a sweet little lady student apropos Sherwood Anderson's "The Other Woman."³ The remark at once characterized her as a member of the Second-Grade Bigots. The First-Grade Bigots would not permit themselves to see any excellences in a work so pronouncedly unorthodox. When cornered, the little lady admitted that there might be sound psychology in Anderson's story—and a large measure of unsavory truth. "But why choose such horrid themes when there are so many nice, clean ones?" It is the cry of all Pollyanna-nurtured readers. It's the cry of the author of "Pollyanna" herself. "Is there, then, no human experience that deals with the good, the happy, the beautiful?" she asks, in a circular issued by her publishers. "Are joy, faith and purity utterly illogical? Is only the thunder-cloud

³ *Little Review*, May-June, 1920. Also included in E. J. O'Brien's "Best Short Stories of 1920," Small, Maynard & Company, and in Anderson's "The Triumph of the Egg." B. W. Huebsch.

real?—the sunshine a sham?" In such cases argument is impossible. The criterion of moral and optimistic content is deep-rooted and well-nourished by authority. Is it not largely this same criterion that for more than a half century prevented the acceptance by the Judges of Walt Whitman as a poet, and that is excluding the name of Theodore Dreiser from its rightful place in our scholarly histories of the modern American novel?

To counteract this blind perpetuation of a fallacious doctrine demands a complete severance with old school criticism and old-age pedagogy. Not until authority-worship is mightily shaken can this be accomplished. But that would be a hopeless task to undertake. The great mass must have and will have its Great Authorities to bow to. It is easier than to depend upon one's own critical faculties. Besides, habit has become second nature. We have always been taught that knowledge is merely to know where to find what we want to know. No, we must be merciful; our literary apostles must remain. But among them there are those that are blind with senility and those that are glowing with fresh vision. Let us follow the more musical of the new criers until they, in their turn, reach their dotage and truth turns to ashes in their toothless mouths. In no other way can we hope to uproot the puerile beliefs that art can be judged by its optimistic or uplifting message, by its morality, or

by any other of, what Joel Elias Spingarn terms, the "Seven confusions." We have not yet reached the stage where the relativity of the term "morality" can be discussed with impunity and to any considerable advantage. But we can bring to bear upon a rising generation of readers and writers all the force of our warm logic to combat the notion that any standard of morality, no matter how sublime, has any determining value in art. We can insist that a story might be entirely devoid of any moral significance and yet be an immortal masterpiece; that the whole notion is merely another one of the confusions we have inherited from an age which was too busy developing the raw resources of a vast young continent—a task which necessitated the invocation of Providential aid—to pay attention to literature.

"To say that poetry (or any other art) is moral or immoral is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral and an isosceles triangle immoral. Surely we must realize the absurdity of testing anything by a standard which does not belong to it or a purpose for which it was not intended. Imagine these whiffs of conversation at a dinner table: 'This cauliflower would be excellent if it had only been prepared in accordance with international law.' 'Do you know why my cook's pastry is so good? He has never told a lie or seduced a woman.' But why multiply obvious examples? We do not concern ourselves with morals when we

test the engineer's bridge or the scientist's researches; indeed we go farther, and say that it is the moral duty of the scientist to disregard morals in his search for truth. As a man he may be judged by moral standards, but the truth of his conclusions can only be judged by the standard of science. . . . Art is expression, and poets succeed or fail by their success or failure in completely and perfectly expressing themselves. If the ideals they express are not the ideals we admire most, we must blame not the poets but ourselves; in the world where morals count we have failed to give them the proper material out of which to rear a nobler edifice. To separate art and morality is not to destroy moral values but to augment them—to give them increased powers and a new freedom in the realm in which they have the right to reign."⁴

3. *Religion*

It is literally true that American literature is not irreverent. The penalty for meddling with religion in any unconventional way is contemptuous obscurity. But meddling with religion in a way that brings out its blessings to humanity is praiseworthy and leads to opulence and glory. For that reason nine-tenths of our literature has a strain of religious righteousness running through it. In the main

⁴ Joel Elias Spingarn, "The Seven Arts and The Seven Confusions," *Seven Arts*, March, 1917.

the specters of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards still hover over our literary output, imparting to it a theological tint. Our fictionists are still obsessed with the idea that a story or a novel must preach, must instill the right kind of ideals, must exert a redeeming influence upon its reader. To be sure, the experienced ones among them are fully aware of the dangers of obvious moralizing, but they have mastered the devious ways of preaching without arousing the reader's suspicion that he is being preached to.

It is this last point—the devious ways of unsuspected preaching—that my profession is concerned with. Either we are altogether silent on the subject of religion in literature, deeming it too ticklish a subject upon which to commit ourselves, or we are zealous in our efforts to perpetuate the tradition that literature must complement the work of the church, only in a less outspoken way. Perhaps we do not do it consciously but the results obtained are the same. We merely advise students as to what subjects may be exploited and what subjects may not. Surely a subject bordering on the atheistic could never be made salable; not more than two or three periodicals would be open to such a story—and these of the obscure, "freaky" kind. Without a doubt even such a mild story as Balzac's "An Atheist's Mass" could never have seen the light of publication in an American periodical. The fact

that the hero remains unconverted to the end would be fatal. We may write a story about an atheist, and have written such, but in our story, when the dénouement comes, the hero must exclaim to the assembled multitude, that he had tried to live without God and had found it unprofitable. The fact that there might be some poor wretch of a hero in this queer wide world who would not issue such a proclamation does not detract from the urgency of such a dénouement. It is one of our devious ways; without it the story can hope to travel no farther than the return-to-author basket. The characters we create must ultimately come to know God and the church—or they never come to know the reader. It is doubtful if an American Flaubert could hope for as cordial a reception of an atheistic character of his as the French have accorded the mediocre M. Homais of “Madame Bovary” fame.

It is far from my purpose to leave the implication that literature should preach atheism; but neither should it preach religion, theology, or anything else, for that matter, except in so far as life itself is a sermon to whomever it pleases to view it as such. “As a rule we may say that nothing in the world improves one less than sermonizing books and conversations; nothing is more wearisome, quite apart from the fact that nothing is more inartistic. . . . We do not demand of an author that he should work to make us better. . . . All that we

can demand of him is that he work conscientiously.”⁵ The moment an author stoops to uplift us he loses his balance as an artistic observer, recorder, and interpreter.

The attitude of our literature toward religion is based on a churchy interpretation of life and character which was unconsciously but none the less comprehensively expressed in a magazine article by Dr. Frank Crane. “Church people,” he wrote, “as a rule, pay their debts, observe the decencies of life, are clean of mind and body, cultivate those qualities that make for a successful and contented life, and get along together peacefully. And, as a rule, the embezzlers, thugs, drunkards, harlots, rascals, adulterers, gamblers, and swindlers do not cultivate church-going to any great extent.”⁶

This is a safe and sane doctrine to embrace when writing fiction for the popular magazines. Our editors, almost universally, have embraced it, and even though the Reverend Doctor specifically states that he speaks of people “as a rule,” which would permit of exceptions, editors at large will not recognize the existence of such exceptions. Truth does not count and experience is an illusion. If a writer has in his life had the misfortune of coming across a man or woman who was kind, charitable, gentle, moral, and noble and yet instead of being affiliated

⁵ George Brandes, *On Reading*.

⁶ “All Else Will Pass,” *People’s Favorite Magazine*, January, 1921.

with a church was a member of the Secular League and a subscriber to the Truth Seeker he would best suppress the latter two points. If a writer has read statistics of extra-generous donations made to various church funds and has found among the names of donors not a few of universally notorious embezzlers, he must ignore the fact, if only in the interests of his career. His motto must be: Never write anything about church that could not be turned into an advertisement of the institution. If the motto conflicts with life, scratch life.

And yet religion, like sex, is one of the basic forces of life; it has helped to shape the course of human history and civilization. To deny the artist the prerogative to touch upon it unless it be in praise is to deny him the means to probe the human soul. To compel him to accept any institution as infallible and therefore beyond question of imperfection is to fetter his spirit. That a man who is a respected member of a respected church cannot be a thief in his business life or a brute at home is a more prostituting doctrine, the more so if not actually believed in but adopted for commercial purposes only, than any harlot was ever guided by, because it is so flagrantly contrary to truth. That the call of sex can never prove stronger than the holiest of religious precepts is a malicious canon of hypocritical dogmatism. This is the natural stuff of literature—the dramatic conflicts and seeming

paradoxes, physical, psychic and intellectual, the eternal clash of nature and dogma, of passion and idea, of man and the world.

Puny fledgelings come to us for instruction in aerial literary navigation and we look in the tome of *Thou Shalt Nots* and clip their weak little wings. "Never dare to lift yourself more than a yard above the earth," we admonish; "and you'll find it easier if you use this trick and that," we add. If, perchance, one of them after awhile finds the fawning breath of the earth too close and spreads its wings and begins to soar up into the clear ether we shrug our shoulders compassionately and say to the rest: "Another young bird gone wrong." It has broken the limits of our taboos; it has tasted the wine of pure ozone; it has heard the call of exploration; it has turned irreverent. Should it succeed in growing a few dazzling feathers by the time it comes back in sight we may meet it with music and shout to it the hospitality of our gardens—as a mark of our ability to appreciate fine feathers; but more frequently we let it starve to death and keep the music for a touching funeral. During their lifetime we have nothing to do with the irreverent. . . .

4. Social and Political Problems

No literature is more afraid of a courageous presentation of the social welter which America, in common with all the rest of the world, is undergoing

in this age of reconstruction, than American literature. Not that it entirely fails to touch upon the mighty problems that have shaken our national life, but it still clings to an ancient sense of delicacy and an orthodox point of view which determines what may and may not be said. Whether a writer really subscribes to the point of view which colors nearly all of our efforts is immaterial; in order to sell his product he must adopt it, irrespective of any protesting personal scruples he might feel. Thus we find our literature, with the exception of a small and highly unprofitable part, expressing no more advanced views on the social phenomena of the day than our forefathers held, and most frequently less advanced.

The editor of *The Coming Nation*, discussing the kind of stories that are not wanted by film companies, mentions, among others, stories "where the hero arises and makes a soap-box speech on Socialism converting all by-standers."⁷ This statement applies with equal force to our magazine fiction as well. That no respectable editor of a fiction periodical will take such stories is a fact universally known among people acquainted with prevailing policies of our magazines. There would be nothing sinister in this policy, it would even be highly laudable, were it based on the logical assumption that men's minds are not so easily swayed and that there-

⁷ *Writing the Photoplay*, Esenwein & Leeds.

fore no audience of by-standers can be converted by a single speech. But it is based on no such reasoning. The fact is that the story depicting a speaker converting by a few eloquent phrases, let us say, a body of strikers, to the employer's point of view, impelling them to forsake their scheming leaders, tainted by European gold, of course, and return to work will and does find a ready market. Even the lack of story values are frequently overlooked where such a fictive incident occurs. The greatest of our national weeklies and monthlies will open their columns to the padded dissertation in story disguise on the unreasonableness of workingmen, or the inefficiency of government control of industries, or the blessings of a Big Business Administration.

What really determines the policy of exclusion of certain topics or angles of presentation is the safeguarding of the interests of the big advertisers and the personal prejudices of the publishers. Our experienced writers, as well as the instructors of student-writers who know their business, know these prejudices perfectly. They know that popular views "get by" even if the artistry is not so very obtrusive. They know that unless one can fall in with the established views of the great majority it is best to leave social and political problems alone and to write about the South Seas, or Alaska, or the romantic story of John Jones, Jr., a son of a village

blacksmith, who, after many thrilling hardships finally married Ivy Van Schyler, the pampered heiress of noble lineage and a huge block of sound railroad stock. They even know such small details as that if a hero uses soap, it is best not to mention it by an existing brand, for it may offend advertisers trying to fasten upon the public rival brands; that "talking machine" is safer than "Victrola" or "Gramaphone" or any other patented name; that, in a word, no free advertising be given any company, thus causing other advertisers to complain. They know that it is dangerous to make a character intimate that his health has been impaired as a result of drinking too much ginger-ale, or taking headache powders, or yeast, or tobacco, or anything else, for that matter, that advertisers sell. It makes no difference whether a writer has accumulated a fund of personal observation to corroborate his statement. There are people who are trying to sell these products and will surely lodge a protest with the advertising manager of the publication in which such a story appears. In fact, numerous cases where such inadvertent remarks have resulted in diminished advertising space are on record.

It is to the interest of these same all-powerful advertisers to see that no aspersions be cast in our magazine fiction upon the inalienable rights and dignities of Business and that no dangerous views be expressed which might sway a vigilantly guarded

public mind in undesirable directions. Existing social and political institutions may be defended in our fiction but not attacked or criticized; their merits may be extolled, but their demerits must not be betrayed to an innocent world. Private property is sacred; the State is always right—except when it attempts to interfere with Property; then a thinly veiled story decrying this interference as autocratic, tyrannous and un-American might get by and bring a fair price. Progress is a generality that affects us but little; the laws of change are suspended when applied to our literary reactions to our social life. Other nations may develop new schools of fictionists, young, virile, boldly speaking their minds on the moot problems of the day. We have no room for such impudence. Our literature is "pure," level-headed, conservative. Some isolated muck-rakers appear here and there, but we give them no outlet for their muck-raking, and they must either reform or perish or, at best, when we are helpless to prevent it, get a measure of barren notoriety.

An army officer, an advanced student, once handed in a splendidly written story of army life, in which he gave a graphic portrayal of court-martial proceedings. The apathy and criminal nonchalance with which helpless boys were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, in the name of discipline, was so artistically woven into a thrilling plot that

it made interesting reading even to the most avid fiction devotees. Yet the story had gone the rounds of nearly all the paying magazines without finding a market. A few friendly editors wrote the author personal letters, one editor going so far as to express his appreciation of the work, but admitting that the story was deemed "unavailable because it does not meet with the policy of this publication." I supplied the discouraged author with a list of unconventional publications—for fortunately we do have a fighting number of them with us—that might welcome his story but could afford to pay either very little or not at all. He refused to waste his work on the "freaks," and wanted to know if he could not revise the story to make it salable to a standard magazine. I told him that elimination of all incidents reflecting unfavorably upon the administration of law in our army would undoubtedly help. He protested that the incidents had been taken from life and held out for a while, but finally he succumbed to his intense desire to "get in." The story was revised and made perfectly harmless—"sweet" and happy; it sold on its first trip. The officer has never again attempted to use life as a basis for fiction—indiscriminately. It was his first altercation with policies—and probably his last. It requires greater powers than he was blessed with to put up a more valiant resistance.

It is a sad comment on education that under exist-

ing circumstances, instructors of writers are obliged to help undermine this natural resistance a few rebellious spirits occasionally display. One whose entire stock in trade is a knowledge of markets and policies and an ability to expound existing standards is not in a very advantageous position to encourage disregard of immutable taboos. We must say, on reading a story which is off-standard, that it won't sell, and why. We must formulate and enforce the rules that make for "success" in fiction writing. We must be vestals of the sacred fires. I am aware that "vestals" is not exactly the right word one should use in this connection; perhaps another word connoting less virtue would be more apt. But, after all, most of us are honest, and zealously believe that the fires are sacred and must not be allowed to go out or be polluted. Vision? Well, —aren't the blind happy?

5. *Americanism*

As applied to our literature the term American has come to mean everything and anything. It compliments the mediocre twaddle of mediocre minds. To earn the compliment a story must be neither sad nor "fresh" nor irreverent nor "red." It must not be burdened with too much thought or sincere emotion. It must have no glimmer of an original idea. It must "kiss the hand that feeds it,"—which means in this case that it must breathe

a sweet humility to all our institutions, from the First Law of the land to the American Legion and Babe Ruth. It must be "glad to be alive and carry on"—everything that is old and respectable and decrepit and green with mold.

Let a piece of literary art reflect an unhackneyed thought, let it break any one of our ancient taboos, let it dare to belittle any one of our glorified generalities and dogmas—and it is promptly howled down as un-American. The literature of every other country on earth affords an interpretative and critical view of the psychology of the national mind it reflects, while American literature is least reflective of the American national mind, except in one particular: its cringing fear of the truth. Were it not for this fear to face the truth, and the inability of the average American to stand criticism, the great bulk of our "literature" would find no buyers and its content would undergo a radical change. It is this national trait that has given rise to the sublime injunction, "Don't knock!" We may have heard of Matthew Arnold, but surely never of his heretic doctrine that literature is a criticism of life. To us literature is largely a matter of so many words at so much per word, or so many hugs and kisses and careers attained per magazine page.

Is it to be wondered at that with us we have the interminable problem: What shall we write about? With one of the largest countries in the world in

which to live; with over one hundred millions of people living and working and battling and dreaming all about us; with a multitude of perplexing problems, international, national, municipal, class, clan, and individual, clamoring for solution; with a rich, ever-shifting panorama of a young, virile, national existence before us; with a million comedies and a million tragedies avidly looking at our type-writer keys—with all this to be had for the taking, isn't it pathetically absurd that we must voyage the seven seas and scour all the corners of the earth in search of material? Open any magazine any month and note the proportion of stories located in far, out-of-the-way places. Even our best writers are following this romantic bent. Twenty-five per cent. of the stories contained in O'Brien's "Year-book" for 1919 had a foreign setting; his "Year-book" for 1920 contained over thirty per cent. of stories with foreign settings—mostly exotic and bizarre. No serious objections could be taken to transcribing the life of foreign places, if we had first become aware of our own. But we have not. We hunt for foreign material simply because we are afraid to sift our own. We are only now beginning to realize that our young continent—this huge, crude meltingpot—is filled with brass and copper and gold, and that these metals are melting and fusing into some homogeneous substance, which we vaguely term America. We want this burst of con-

sciousness to grow and sweep us along to great revelations, but a false pride and obsolete traditions and hypocritical dogmas are blocking the way. Parrot-like we shout from pulpit and rostrum and cathedra the old banality: "Boost! All the world loves a booster!" And because we like to be loved we dare not touch upon the wounds of life—the hunger, the passions, the buffets, the defeats that purge its sordidness, gild its drabness, and actuate us to nobler aspirations.

We pride ourselves that we have developed the short story to perfection. It has become our national form of literary expression. It has reached an unparalleled vogue. But, in truth, if we are entitled to pride, it is on account of our remarkable achievement of an ability to tell an entertaining tale without telling anything worth while. Paradoxically, we squeeze amusement out of nothing. We have attained an excellence of workmanship without the least depth of substance. But I am anticipating. This phase of the subject is so important that it deserves a chapter for itself, which it will receive later on. The real perfection of our short story is yet to come. The signs are that it is having its birth pangs at this time. Writers of rich promise have come to the fore recently—and here and there a magazine, either new or an old one with a new policy, to receive their product. Our perfected short story will be bold, fearless,

vital; beating with the vigorous pulse of a giant nation stretching its limbs. It will be truly American—optimistic, with the rugged optimism of a Walt Whitman; brave, with the courage of an impetuous youth; rich, with the colors of a fertile soil and a blending humanity. Perhaps our short story is to fulfill the hopes H. G. Wells once had for the novel:

“The novel,” he wrote in *An Englishman Looks at the World*, “is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding . . . the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas . . . We are going to write . . . about the whole of human life. We are going to deal with political questions and religious questions and social questions . . . until a thousand pretenses and ten thousand impostures shrivel in the cold clear air of our elucidations. . . . Before we have done we will have all life within the scope of the novel.”

A lofty assignment, this, for a form of literature that is rooted, as our short story always has been, in the precept that to be interesting it must eschew reality. But we can carry it out—and will. Our pioneers are already on the trail—weak as yet, not a full-grown Chekhov among them—but gaining in hardihood, and singing. The hordes behind them are waiting in safety; let the trail become a bit smoother, the hardships lessened, and they will

follow. In the meantime who that is filled with that eternally human envious admiration for pluck can keep back his "Good cheer!" and "Godspeed!"?

CHAPTER VI

THE ARTIFICIAL ENDING

One of the surest tags of the American short story has been its happy ending. No matter what vicissitudes the hero or heroine may have undergone, what problems and tragedies may have overtaken them, what unmendable exploits of circumstance or fate they may have been subjected to, in the end all must be well with them. The happy ending is a direct result of our uplift optimism, of our Pollyanna philosophy of life, of our fear of reality. We have always justified it on the ground of our national psychology, which, we claim, is buoyant and aggressive and won't accept defeat. We have insisted that the American always "gets what he wants when he wants it." And even the cynics among us did not dispute our last claim; they pointed to the happy ending.

It is true that of late, since it has become the fashion to question everything, the happy ending has come in for its share of blasphemous discussion. Here and there views have been expressed that a happy ending is not absolutely necessary to make a story readable; some of these views are so decid-

edly antagonistic as to maintain that a happy ending is invariably inartistic, which simply proves, again, that rebound is directed with equal force but in opposite direction as the original bound. Even aspiring story writers come in occasionally inoculated with doubt of the very propriety of the happy ending. To such, we the votaries of the perfect short story, having exhausted all our erudite arguments in a vain attempt at reconversion, finally apply the one unfailing argument—the threat of the editorial rejection slip. The happy ending, we admit, may not always be artistic, and it may not always bring an acceptance, but the unhappy ending almost invariably brings a rejection.

The fallacy of the happy ending clearly illustrates the lack of any sound system of thought or reasoning underlying the exposition and production of American fiction. We have the support of venerable theories and formulas and high-sounding abstractions, but not of facts and logic. It is as if we dared not examine the result of the application of our theories and the filling of our formulas. Glibly we state the psychology of the average American reader, which we profess to know so well, but do not care to assure ourselves whether our deductions, and even our major premises are correct. For if it were true that the average reader always demands a happy ending, we would have no explanation of the popularity of most of the works of Poe,

Bret Harte, Jack London, Kipling, Conrad, Maupassant, and even the gray Russians. Doubtless there are individual characteristics in the writings of these gentlemen that have appealed to our happily disposed readers, but how much of the appeal has been due to a vogue created by official O. K.'ers? The inchoate reversion to an insistence on the unhappy ending, which is becoming apparent among some layers of our reading public, tends to confirm this suggestion. For it is not probable that the same people who have never been able to enjoy a story unless it ended happily should suddenly have been seized with a passionate amour for the "morbid" ending; and, from any rational point of view, it is just as fallacious to accept the unhappy ending as an invariable rule as it is to accept the happy ending. One may be as artificial as the other.

Manifestly there are kinks in the average reader's psychology of which we have not been aware, or if we have, have paid little attention to. This psychology which we have taken for granted and builded upon is not after all so solid as we have supposed it to be. It can be and is being molded. It appears that the present-day average reader fears nothing so much as the imputation of being average. Here and there a brave soul may vociferously boast of being a "low-brow," thus betraying a troubled consciousness of mediocrity, but on the whole the tendency is to deplore the tastes of the average,

thereby imputing to one's self, by implication of contrast, the possession of tastes above those of the average. Hence the sudden ability to enjoy an unhappy ending. Hence also the distrust of the average editor of this sudden growth in taste. He knows its make-believe nature: the average reader may learn to pretend a dislike for the good old happy ending, but in truth he enjoys it as much as he ever did. Hence the continued demand for stories with happy endings.

This may not be such a cheering view of the average reader's psychology, but neither is it entirely cheerless. By exploiting its hypocritical vein of pretended admiration for good literature, we may hope ultimately to develop a genuine admiration. People of habitual coarse tastes, for beverages, delicacies, clothes or arts, usually begin the refining process by affecting the tastes of those whom they think their betters. The process itself is rather long and tedious and often disheartening. But the aping instinct helps measurably. We cannot hope to have a discriminating reading public in a day. Too long have we impressed upon our public the blessings of a happy disposition and the artistry of reflecting it in our literature. Too long have we brazened about our pride in Pollyanna, Wallingford, Torchy, and a hundred other fictive chasers of the blues, who won't take defeat but go on singing on their way. The happy story, with its breezy

style, its giggling climax, and its smacking dénouement has become a fixed type from which our readers' affection cannot be so quickly alienated.

D. W. Griffith, one of the ablest producers of moving pictures, is reported to have made the statement that the average spectator of cinema drama has the intelligence of a nine-year-old child.¹ That Mr. Griffith is justified in his statement may be assumed from the huge success he has had in purveying cinema entertainment. He has made millions where others have made scanty half-millions. Verily, he knows his public and is in a position to estimate its mental powers with some measure of accuracy. His contempt of its intelligence does him credit. . . .

One of his greatest successes has been his production of "Way Down East," a spectacular melodrama of the old angel-girl-Satan-man variety, with a resulting illegitimate baby which happily sees fit to die, leaving the little mother to find work with a good Christian family. But her past is against her and she is finally driven out into a terrible snow-storm by a man who quotes the Bible by the yard, and the women in the audience wet their little handkerchiefs, and the men hawk and cough and blow their noses. The big scene of the picture, and which is probably responsible for seventy-five per cent. of the picture's phenomenal

¹ *Literary Digest*, May 14, 1921.

success, shows a whole river of ice floating down toward a furiously-dashing waterfall. The poor little heroine is on one of the huge cakes of ice fast nearing the watery precipice, while the good boy who loves her honestly is jumping like an acrobat after her in the teeth of a raging storm.

Now, all the moving-picture patrons in the country, from the past experience of having witnessed one thousand pictures and read ten thousand magazine stories, ought to know that there is not one chance in a million that the plucky lover will not arrive in time to rescue his sweetheart—such things have not happened and do not happen (in our stories, of course!), yet they become wide-eyed and panting with excitement, as if they were in doubt about the outcome. Griffith uses the “cut-back” every ten or twenty feet, showing the thundering falls, the crashing ice with the limp figure of the girl upon it, the boy precariously maintaining his balance, then back again to the falls; thus prolonging the agony until he thinks the public has got its money’s worth; then the boy arrives, clasps the girl in his arms, his erring Christian father asks her forgiveness and welcomes her as a prospective daughter-in-law, and the public file out in the lobby, exclaiming ecstatically to one another: “What a masterpiece!” Verily, this Mr. Griffith knew whereof he spoke.

Our public is still thrilled with a climax of whose

outcome there ought to be not the slightest doubt. Which merely proves that if our fiction still has a measure of suspense it is not due to our clever technique but to the almost fabulous stupidity of the large mass of readers. We have evolved our tricks of technique for the prime purpose of maintaining a keen suspense, of keeping the outcome of the conflict which every story must have in the balance, of heightening the reader's curiosity to follow the destiny of the hero or heroine in whose behalf his sympathies have been enlisted to a satisfactory end. But if after, let us say, twenty years of reading fiction, there should suddenly dawn upon our average reader's mind the idea that as the hero or heroine of a story is always immortal and unconquerable in the end, no matter how circumstances may appear to be against him or her for the moment, would not our skillfully woven suspense suffer a severe jolt? Of what use would it be to fear for the safety of the trapped little girl when a dogged confidence, gained by profitable experience in reading, would suggest that she is due at the altar on page five and would inevitably keep her appointment? Of what use would be taking seriously the pugilistic encounters of the Man-Who-Can't-Be-Knocked-Out? Why thrill with anxiety over an overturned automobile when it is certain that the hero pinned underneath it will have sustained nothing more serious than a few scratches that must heal before

the final sentence is completed? What would become of all our tricks and ingenuity and inventiveness? Would not this one convention of the invariably happy ending then defeat all our efforts at creating suspense? And if that happened would it not be the direst calamity to all we have worked for, to the entire mechanism of our "perfect" story?

The preceding paragraph is prophetic of what ultimately must happen. As yet that day may be far off in the hazy distance, but when it comes the philosophy of our short story must undergo a complete metamorphosis. Its own glaring contradictions, if not external influences, must ultimately bring that about. To preach Suspense as the highest law, then kill it at its very inception by another law of the happy ending is an absurdity that cannot long remain unapparent even to a nine-year-old intelligence.

Meantime the reaction noted in some quarters toward the invariably unhappy ending is just as sinister an influence toward the rise of another absurdity. Whether this reaction be sincere—as in the case of those who have been fed with glucose fiction *ad nauseam*—or merely fashionable—as in the case of most of the Left Wing of our present-day average reading public—if crystallized and perpetuated as a dogma it is bound to constitute a serious hindrance in the evolution of the short story. Once and for all we must come to an acceptance of

the truth that there can be but one kind of an ending to a story—whether happy or unhappy—and that is the logical one, an ending which is a direct inevitable outgrowth of the story itself. No law can be made that would apply to all stories; each story generates its own laws. The question of repugnance or preferences of the reader does not enter here at all. The question of cause and effect, of intelligent probability gaged by a keen observation of the laws or lack-of-laws of reality—this question alone must become paramount and decisive.

It is true that the noblest literary works, from the dramas of *Æschylus* to the present day, have all been tinged with sadness—Maupassant's definition of literature as being a mirror of life, proving a true one. Also that other one—is it by Goethe?—that literature is the conscience of the human race. In the world of men, with the dark mystery of death as an ever-present certainty, thus sowing a sense of the futility of all human aspirations and achievement in the hearts of even the most aggressive of us; with a lurking consciousness of insurmountable limitations besetting our fondest dreams; with a still more pronounced consciousness that the maturing of dreams frequently marks their decay, and almost always marks the thawing of their dewy glitter—in such a world, literature, welling up from the depths of inner consciousness, cannot help being tinged with sadness. In fact, the vast bulk of the world's lit-

erary masterpieces consists of tragedies. The sooner this fundamental fact is woven into the fiber of American fiction the sooner will American fiction become the mirror of American life and the conscience of the American people.

But this solemn historic consideration does not justify the adoption of a rigid rule that an unhappy ending of a story is artistic and that a happy one is always inartistic. Least of all could it be justified in its application to the short story, which frequently deals with but a single incident in the life of a character rather than with a complete history. There are infinitely more probabilities of ultimate defeat in a complete history than in a single experience. Death is not always the price of an adventure, nor disillusionment that of an undertaking. Conrad's "Youth," melancholy as it is with the breath of finiteness of all our glorious epochs, has no tragic ending. The young commander has dared through stress and storm and adversity, has pitted the strength of his youth against that of the sea and has come out victorious, glowing with the symbolic message: "Do or Die!" And though, when he recounts the narrative of that first command of his, youth is far behind him, he is filled with lyric memories of it far sweeter than his distant exploit itself. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Revolt of Mother" ends happily and yet logically and artistically. Perhaps in her next encounter with her hard-hearted

and hard-headed husband Mother won't be as successful, but in this one which Mrs. Freeman had chosen to relate, she carries the day. Maupassant's "Moonlight" ends well. The old Abbé realizes that "God perhaps has made such nights as this to clothe with his ideals the loves of men," and the young couple can henceforth love unmolested. James Branch Cabell's "Wedding Jest" ends happily, although satirically—the point of the story—not a happy one by any means—being contained particularly in the ending. An enumeration of all the great short stories that have happy endings would make a paragraph of considerable length.

From any technical point of view the unhappy ending, when canonized into a convention, will defeat any skill and ingenuity or even natural artistry in the maintenance of suspense. After a while readers will learn that every story must end unhappily and will be on their guard. Already the few periodicals that have made a convention of the unconventional ending are suffering a depressing monotony. There really is no reason for following the love illusions of the unsophisticated heroine when it is certain that disillusionment awaits her in the end. Nor is there reason for feeling elated over the success of our hero when we know that it is temporary, that it is only a matter of paragraphs or pages before this success will be turned into defeat.

If then we arrive at the conclusion that neither

the happy ending nor the tragic ending is in itself an indication of artistry, but must be considered in its relation to the story it ends, we arrive at a view which is at once rational and simple—so simple, in fact, that it seems banal to emphasize it. In the matter of endings we have been thinking in terms of producing the greatest effect, totally ignoring their inevitability as culminating points of given sets of plot influences. We know that the end of a story marks an emphatic place which leaves the greatest impression upon the reader's mind; it is, rhetorically, a strategic point, and therefore we concentrate all our surprises, our jugglery, our uplift message and our disposition upon this point. We want the reader to go away smiling, or pleasantly startled, or, if we write for the conventionally unconventional publication, unpleasantly satisfied. The fact that a writer after having set his characters in motion and allowing them to act and react upon the various forces of the plot, to mold and be molded, has no power over the ending other than that of guiding the threads of his story—characters, motives and circumstances—to the end they are logically bound for, is as yet obscure among us. We are associating the ending with its impressions upon the reader, with its gallery value—rather than with the soul of the story. As Mr. Carl Van Doren, former literary editor of *The Nation* and now of *The Century* has expressed it: "According to all

the codes of the more serious kinds of fiction, the unwillingness—or the inability—to conduct a plot to its legitimate ending implies some weakness in the artistic character.”²

This weakness that Mr. Van Doren refers to in reality arises from our very conception of the function of fiction and the motives that govern its birth. In a majority of cases the prime motive for writing a story is to obtain a check from a publisher; the dazzling figures cited in our newspapers and writers' magazines as the incomes of some fictionists exert an irresistible appeal. The constant hammering upon literature as a commodity which can be and is being produced as any other commodity at such and such a price, the size being determined upon its ability to perform the clownish function of supplying a laugh or a thrill to the largest number of T. B. M.'s or T. B. W.'s, is another influence responsible for this weakness. That fiction is a medium for the expression of a writer's reactions to his business of living is a view that mighty few of our writers, editors, and literary savants seem to hold. So that the fallacy of the happy ending, and of the unhappy ending as well, is inevitably bound up with the larger fallacy of mistaking the manufacture of stories for the function of literature.

² “Booth Tarkington,” *The Nation*, February 9, 1921.

CHAPTER VII

FORM AND SUBSTANCE

Jack London in his confessions of his struggle for recognition as a writer gives this formula for success in literature: Health, Work, and a Philosophy of Life. Health is necessary, of course, in order to do any hard work, and in a world against which old Malthus railed, nothing can be attained without hard work. But it is the value of the third ingredient which is most often overlooked and the absence of which is responsible for the failure of most of our literary output to rise above the level of mediocrity. We have noted, in another place, that Jack London himself, in the bulk of his production, failed to strike more than an occasional deep and sincere chord, but it was not because his ear was faulty; it was simply because his audience rejected precisely the deep chord.

Let it be understood that by a philosophy of life Jack London did not refer to any definite view on economic reform or social regeneration. Narrow, limited, prejudiced views have but little place in literature; if presented by the hand of an artist, they may appeal for a short time, but never for very

long. Great writers there have been who were not as actively engaged in the squabbles of the world as Jack London was and who did not take definite sides in the skirmishes of any generation but they have all had a philosophy of life none the less, in that they have all had a broad, philosophic comprehension of the basic laws which govern human life and actions; of causes and effects conducive to human suffering and happiness; and of the reactions of these basic laws upon the author himself so that he is able to present them from a definite angle—his angle.

It is the possession of this individual angle upon the everlasting panorama of life and death which distinguishes the vital master from the flabby mechanic. We might call it philosophy of life, independence of mind, originality, idealism, or what not, in all cases it makes for substance—the thing by which a work of art lives.

No slight is intended on the value of form in literature. If the appropriate masterful form clothes this vital substance, so much the better, of course, but it is the substance that is the protoplasm. Form follows fads and fashions, and is decidedly mortal; substance alone illustrates the immutable law of the indestructibility of matter. With all their beautiful rhetoric and genial humor, the *Spectator* and *Tatler* papers of Addison and Steele are mildly entertaining dead matter today, but the trag-

edies and comedies of the Bard of Avon are as appealing today as three centuries ago, even though handicapped by a form no longer in vogue. Dostoyevsky's novels, to take a more modern example, were written in a style as clumsy and uncouth as ever novels could be written in, but their burning pages sear the souls of men who read them. The gift of substance is in them—a fiery miracle, an *Apocalypse*.

The one supremely outstanding feature in our American fiction is its lack of substance. Some of us have the O. Henry style and some of us have the Henry James style and still others have the Washington Irving or the Poe style; some of us can plot and others can end a story with a flourish; some possess a dazzling vocabulary and others are genii of rhetoric—but how many have something sustaining to impart to a world drowning in platitudes? How much of worth has our fiction added to the world's sum of comprehension of beauty, of truth? We have developed schools and systems of teaching and learning how to say things; we have bent every effort toward the evolving of a science of expression only to find that we have been too busy expressing to acquire what to express. American ethics has always been a point of national pride, but we have never applied it to the art of talking brilliantly when one has nothing to say. As George Macdonald once put it: ". . . If a man has nothing to

communicate, there is no reason why he should have a good style, any more than why he should have a good purse without any money, or a good scabbard without any sword."

Again, the acquisition of nobility of form is not to be discouraged, but the possession of something to tell the world is the sublimest of gifts, and gains the world's everlasting gratitude; and the greatest seeming anomaly in the conditions under which American literature is produced is that this gift is not only rated at a discount but fought, vilified, grappled with. The only way the gift can be acquired, if it can, is through an insatiable interest in the stuff and forms of life; but such interest leads to inquiry and inquiry leads to heresy; venerable taboos are broken. The anomaly becomes a normal result of an inferior conception of the rights and functions of literature. Prejudices are placed above art; policies above truth; words above meanings.

Once, at a suffrage gathering, a young writer was introduced by a friend to a famous writer whose encouragement the beginner desired. At the end of the evening the friend asked the famous writer for his impressions of the budding genius. "I have not read any of his work," the famous writer answered, "but I am afraid he has not the makings of a genius. The way he snubbed the poor girl I introduced him to merely because she is a salesgirl indicates that he lacks the voracious interest in the human element

which marks the true artist. How is he ever going to talk Man when he doesn't know Man?"

Voracious interest—that's the path that leads to the gift of substance, to the "philosophy of life," the original angle! Cæsar saw before he conquered. And he had to come a long way before he could see. But he wanted to see. And it is wanting to see that is the whip of genius. Dickens walked the streets of London for hours, through rain and fog and slush and shine, because he wanted to see it, all of it, every nook and corner of it. Balzac tramped the length and breadth of Paris, haunted parks and shops and drawing-rooms, because the human comedy appealed to him. The Russian Kuprin dressed himself in a diver's suit and had himself lowered many fathoms into the Black Sea because he wanted to experience the sensations of a diver. And Jack London circled the globe because he wanted to see what it is like.

A little class-room episode comes to mind. In the poetry class Carl Sandburg came up for discussion. A few of his Chicago poems were read when a fair would-be poet spoke up in protest. "I have lived in Chicago all my life," she said, "and have never seen the things Sandburg sees!" But there was another student in the room, a very unobtrusive little girl sitting somewhere in the back of the room, and she suddenly came to her instruc-

tor's rescue. "That's why you are not Sandburg!" she exclaimed. . . .

The true artist is the perpetual explorer. He cannot invent the substance of his work, but he can discover it in the life of nature and his fellow-men. And the more he sees the more he learns to see, for to be able to see the new and unexplored in the old and elemental is the highest art in itself. A hunch-back to a child in the streets is an object to throw stones at, to a Victor Hugo he is a grand, heroic figure, fierce and glorious in his pathetic grandeur. A typhoon to a Chinese fisherman represents the wrath of his god for the omission of a prayer or a sacrifice; to Joseph Conrad it symbolizes the majestic resentment of the Sea itself against man's desecration of its peace and beauty and mystery. Only the American artist knows no symbols and is warned against attempting to know.

Our great cry has always been: "Acquire form!" Grammar, rhetoric, metrics, technique—these have been the indispensable tools of our writers. They still are. But having acquired them our writers find they can fashion nothing beautiful, nothing lasting, nothing that will weather the storms of time. For no tools, no matter how sharp or perfect, can accomplish the feat of fashioning something out of vacuum. The American story always has laid claims to style—but it hasn't lived. Writers have come and had their vogue and gone. Even years

back when style was more leisurely and rounded, when the badge of haste was not upon it, Charles Dudley Warner remarked: "We may be sure that any piece of literature which attracts only by some trick of style, however it may blaze up for a day and startle the world with its flash, lacks the element of endurance. We do not need much experience to tell us the difference between a lamp and a Roman candle."

This remark can be elaborated on, explained, complemented. The truth is that there can be no style without substance. These elements are not separate entities; only superficially do they seem to be. How much sweetness can a "sweet nothing" contain? How much beauty can a work of "art" contain which has emptiness of thought and ugliness of conception? How much truth can be embedded in a fundamental falsehood? Every great poet has found the soul of his poem determining its form. Great style grows from within—it is an off-shoot of great substance. To the American writer this relationship has never been apparent; and most of our critics, professing a lofty æstheticism from the shadows of their academies, have never paid attention to it. Our literature cannot boast the possession of a single lucid outline of this vital relationship between form and substance such as the following from Remy de Gourmont's "Le Probleme du Style." I wonder how many authors of textbooks exhorting

American would-be authors to learn the cabalistic lore of expression have ever read this:

“A new fact or a new idea is worth more than a fine phrase. A lovely phrase is a lovely thing and so is a lovely flower. But their duration is almost the same—a day, a century. Nothing dies more swiftly than a style which does not rest upon the solidity of vigorous thinking. Such a style shrivels like a stretched skin; it falls in a heap as ivy does from the rotten tree that once gave it support. . . .

“It is probably an error to attempt to distinguish between form and substance. . . . There is no such thing as amorphous matter; all thought has a limit, hence a form, since it is a partial representation of true or possible, real or imaginary life. Substance engenders form exactly as the tortoise and the oyster do the materials of their respective shells. . . .

“Form without a foundation, style without thought—what a poor thing it is! . . .

“If nothing lives in literature except by its style, that is because works well thought out are invariably well written. But the converse is not true. Style alone is nothing. . . .

“The sign of the man in any intellectual work is the thought. The thought *is* the man. And style and thought are one.”¹

¹ From Ludwig Lewisohn's translation in “A Modern Book of Criticism.” Boni & Liveright.

If we were candid enough the proper answer to make to this brilliant Frenchman would be: "Who told you that literature is an 'intellectual work'?" But we are not candid enough. Only in our strictly professional journals do we dare liken literature to cobbling or tin-smithing or hod-carrying; in the official world, in our lectures and book-reviews, we consider it an art and talk of Muses and Pegasus and all the artistic divinities of Mount Olympus and Chillicothe.

A simple confession will not be amiss here. This discussion has been largely a plea for the man and woman who would find in literature, and in the short story specifically, the relief of a burdened soul. The influences that would withhold this relief are multitudinous and powerful. The struggle is unequal and pathetic. But of the hundreds of literary aspirants that have come to my personal notice only an isolated individual here and there was blessed with any kind of a burden. The vast multitude of souls were cheerfully lightweight and unencumbered. These aspirants came to study technique so that they might learn how to write salable stories, but they had no stories to tell. Some of them believed they could become great story writers because when at school they had received excellent marks in composition; others claimed on more general grounds a gift of expression and they wished to put it to practical use. That it was necessary to have

lived in order to write of life was a thought that had never occurred to them. They were blissfully unaware of such a necessity. They needed form, nothing else, and applied themselves conscientiously toward its acquisition. The irony of the whole matter is that they actually estimated their deficiency accurately: form was what they wanted, and nothing else. After a while they began to sell. In all cases the unhappy aspirants who were plagued with thoughts and emotions have found it harder to sell, no matter how much excellence of form they succeeded in acquiring. In the field of the American short story, the "lightweights" have it, so far.

It is true, of course, that even a lightweight must have something to clothe with his all-potent form—be it a skeleton ever so rattling. But that has been answered in Chapter IV on the Moving Pictures. There are themes a-plenty, airy, optimistic, harmless themes that no respectable editor, reader, or Board of Censorship can object to. They can be adapted and readapted an infinity of times, provided each time a new twist or a "different" trick is introduced.

All our themes seem to have divided themselves into two grand classes: Stereotyped themes out of which stories are made, and Life themes out of which literature is made. The first class contains an abundance of material that any one might have for the taking, but which to make salable requires all the tricks of form that we have so flamboyantly

evolved to disguise its hackneyed origin. The second class contains all the substances of existence that only those that feel their kinship thereto can transmute into literature. All the style and form that the science of writing can teach cannot hope to produce one breathing story unless the theme is eloquent with this kinship. Such is the story of genius—the story that lives and endures. Such a story may or may not have mechanical values; it will captivate and thrill; ruffle and soothe; make and destroy. Such a story will be found to have a theme not chosen with an eye for gallery approval; not even because the writer himself approves of it. One cannot approve or disapprove of the stuff he is made of. One merely accepts it. After all there is only one theme—inexhaustible—out of which genuine literature has always been and always will be made, perhaps it is the simple theme of Tagore's court poet: "The theme of Krishna, the lover god, and Radha, the beloved, the Eternal Man and the Eternal Woman, the sorrow that comes from the beginning of time, and the joy without end."²

² "The Victory," in *Hungry Stones and Other Stories*.

CHAPTER VIII

FINALE

There is more than a modicum of depression, then, in a contemplative sweep of the literary product we are instrumental in creating. Even the most complacent members in my profession must find it so. For one thing, the very lack of variety in the finished product we so painstakingly cultivate must occasionally become irksome, if nothing more serious. Analyzing stories by a hundred different writers, both successful and would-be, and all of these stories with one puny soul must in the end become a very tiresome routine indeed.

It is true that we are not masters of the situation. Who are we to set up standards and direct the footsteps of the young toward them? We are but the interpreters of existing standards and the formulators and expositors of ways that lead to the meeting of the exaction imposed by them. But if an uneasy thought sometimes, at dusk, buzzes into our incautious ear that the existing standards lead to unregenerate mediocrity, should we not pause and ask if perpetuating these standards is for the good of our souls or even for the work we love (and a

great many of us really do love our work!) ? Perhaps a revision of our texts—if not a bonfire—might result in fewer stories but more inspiring ones. Perhaps the demolition of magazine standards might result in the birth of literary standards. As it is, should we not face the truth that all the masters that have ever manipulated pen or typewriter have disregarded our standards and set up new ones of their own? They may not have gone to the extent of a Kipling who wrote to a beginner that “No man’s advice is the least benefit in our business, and I am a very busy man. Keep on trying until you either fail or succeed.” They all have looked for and accepted intelligent advice of one kind or another—from eminent contemporaries and from those that had preceded them. But they have not slavishly copied and imitated. They have not felt that any advice had the power of divine commandment. No real artist could be expected to create anything in the environment of the rubrics and inhibitions with which we have surrounded him.

All the blame that can be heaped upon the public and our magazine editors does not absolve the literary clergy from the share of harm they have contributed to the existing state of the American short story. The cheapest form of advertising and the most erudite and conscientious of our textbooks combine in the creation of a peculiar psychology that a story is some concoction that any one might learn

to make up by mere exertion. Here is a typical advertisement appearing on the back page of a current magazine:

HOW I MADE \$350.00 ON ONE SHORT STORY
And How I Learned To Write, In Only a Few
Evenings, Stories That Actually Sell Themselves.

Then follows a full-page testimony of some one who has made a great success of story-writing by spending the small sum of \$5 on the course advertised. The course itself was prepared by a leading professor in a leading eastern university and whose name is well-known in the literary world. And almost every important textbook on the subject abounds in statements such as the following taken from one of the most intelligent works: "the events which go to make up a fictional plot are artificially arranged so as to bring about a particular result,"³ besprinkled with numerous analogies to the various trades and professions and how long it takes for the average apprentice to become an accomplished artizan. The psychology of tricks and twists and points is foisted upon the writer, the reader, the editor. By constant repetition we ourselves begin to acquire it, if we had it not when we started. . . .

And yet this short volume is not wholly pessimistic. I would not want to leave that impression. For as already stated there have always been writers with a real touch of divine afflatus who have never

³ *Writing the Short Story*, by J. Berg Esenwein, A.M., Lit.D.

paid any attention either to our psychology or to our tricks, or to our inhibitions. "Every fine artist in American fiction will be seen to have discarded both the technical and moral pattern of the magazine tradition and to have developed one of his own."⁴ And the number of these heretics is growing—much faster than some of us are aware. They suffer obscurity and often poverty as all great heretics always have suffered, but they have the fortitude of their calling. Let us listen to the confession of one of them:

"... However, you know that the short-story form has become among us very much what I call corrupt. Publishers of short stories sought what they called the story with a kick in it. Plots for short stories were found and about these plots our writers sought to hang a semblance of reality to life. The plot, however, being uppermost in the writers' minds, what we got was a snappy, entertaining, artificial thing, forgotten completely an hour after it was read.

"Perhaps because of a native laziness, I found myself unable to think up plots. To try to do so bored me unspeakably. On the other hand, there were all about me human beings living their lives and in the process of doing so creating drama....

"I have tried to clutch at it and reproduce in writing some of that drama...."⁵

When the problem involved is what to tell, the sharpening of the faculty of seeing what is worth while, the problem of how to tell becomes of secondary importance. In fact the same literary heretic believes that "An impulse needs but be strong enough to break through the lack of technical train-

⁴ Editorial Reviewer in *The Nation*.

⁵ Sherwood Anderson in an interview for Brentano's *Book Chat*.

ing... technical training might well destroy the impulse. . . .”⁶

Along with the author of “Winesburg, Ohio,” and “The Triumph of the Egg,” there are a host of other writers freshly reacting to life and honestly striving to embody their reactions into stories. It is strange to us, accustomed as we are to clever artificiality, it is even grotesque—this simplicity, naturalness, and daring, but it marks the birth of the American short story—that colorful short form which is destined to become the most perfect artistic expression of our national life. After all, to the true artist the public is no problem, it being composed primarily of himself alone. As Sherwood Anderson expressed it in another passage of the interview quoted above: “I would like a little to understand myself in this mixup, and I am writing with that end in view.” The curse of catering to the public has been a fallacy as great as that of our technique; we have assumed that fiction is made to order for a public, just as we have taught that technique comes first and story substance next. The great writers have all come before their public and have had to wait for the public to catch up with them, but if they hadn’t come first the public would never have caught up. We in America have always striven to give the public what it has wanted, but even in America the

⁶ Sherwood Anderson advertising an exhibition of his paintings in the *Little Review*.

time is fast coming when the gracious public will be inquiring what stories our potent writers have to tell. But not until our writers realize fully that "The public is composed of numerous groups crying out: Console me, amuse me, sadden me, touch me, make me dream, laugh, shudder, weep, think. But the fine spirit says to the artist: Make something beautiful in the form that suits you, according to your personal temperament."⁷ This fine spirit is now becoming evident; it is working its way to the surface.

In this period of awakening, of the real birth of American literature, the genuine educator, always an open-minded student, can do no better than re-evaluate all his acceptances, all his hardened dogmas, all his hereditary literary and educational truths. If he is to help the confused multitude, baffled by a sudden consciousness of the phenomena of existence, to literary self-expression, he must first realize that no formulas are of any avail in the crises of life and therefore are of no avail in literature, the artistic emanation or transmutation of life. He must stimulate thought and independence of thought—even to the point of experimentation—for in such ways have all great contributions to the world's cultural treasury been made. He must cultivate a genuine love of literature rather than of its usual incentive, the emoluments involved, what-

⁷ Guy de Maupassant, in his preface to *Pierre et Jean*.

ever they be, and a critical appreciation of literary values. Thus he may become a positive force in the chariot of our literary progress—a leader, a driver, a discoverer.

CHAPTER IX

EFFECT

Self-flattery is indigenous to man. We like to flatter ourselves that our musings produce a desirable effect but we do not often know the complexion of this effect. What, for instance, shall it be in the case of serious-minded men and women interested in creating short stories and in the aspect of our literary field generally who have read sympathetically the preceding pages? If books are stimuli what shall this particular reaction be?

A few suggestions may not be amiss. They are in a measure a recapitulation of the thoughts expressed, but I like to think of them as formulated by my ideal reader as his more or less conscious artistic credo:

1. I believe that the short story is first of all a form of literature, not merely an article of manufacture.

2. Literature is a form of self-expression. I am a living entity, sensitive to the play and interplay of forces in and all about me. Life in the form of man, of institutions, of passions and ideas affects me and I would reproduce and interpret it. I

would clarify it to myself; I would create for the love of creating, for the beauty of it, for the gratification of the creative urge within me.

3. I recognize no plots that are not derived from the life which I know, which is in and about me; nor any characters which are not derived from and tested by that life.

4. In all my work I have a desire to be truthful, rather than merely clever; simple rather than pretentious; natural rather than surprising. I would voice no thought nor emotion which is alien to my mind and temperament.

5. The genuineness of a view or an emotion is its justification. Truth and spontaneity are more to me than commercial artifice and success. There is no shame in failure except in so far as it implies a departure from standards of artistic honesty.

6. I recognize no taboos. Every phase of life is a worthy theme; every experience known to man is a worthy plot. Things which have interested me have interested other people and I seek to communicate my personal vision to the world. I recognize no valid reason for withholding any part of my vision merely because it may prove unpleasant, uncustomary or unprofitable to some reader. I do not force him to read my work.

7. Nor do I recognize that I have any right, for any reason whatsoever, to color the stuff of life, the reality of which I write. The measure of my

success is the measure in which I can make my reality the reality of those who would read me.

8. The standard of my opinions and emotions is contained within me. I refuse to modify them, to render them less objectionable, or more innocuous, or more in conformity with the standard of the moving pictures or the specifications of any editor, critic, teacher or good friend.

9. I recognize no subject which is rooted in life as either moral or immoral. Every phase of existence is a legitimate theme for the artist, and its morality or immorality is a matter of the reader's own interpretation.

10. I am not afraid of being either pessimistic or optimistic. My moods and ideas are my own and will not be changed to suit the buyer.

11. I am not afraid of being either radical or conservative, depressive or "exhilarating," religious or agnostic, constructive or destructive. The fearless presentation of one's honest views is a virtue in itself.

12. I have no fear of displeasing any one, of displeasing even a majority of readers, editors, critics, citizens. I have faith that there is always a fearless minority willing to hear an honest word; that there are always some avenues for the transmission of the independent vision. Frequently this minority in time grows to a majority—and another rebellious minority takes its place.

13. I believe that all technique is but a means toward effective expression. No tricks are of any value in themselves. No puzzles or jugglings with life's experiences are of any avail, and no technique is worthy of art except in so far as it furthers clarification and artistic presentation of my message.

14. I believe that all the instruction I can get can only be in the way of developing facility of expression. No teacher or textbook can teach me the stuff out of which literature is made.

15. I believe that style is "of the man himself," that it comes from within, that no amount of imitation of O. Henry can give me O. Henry's cleverness, and that no amount of style, even my own, can cover a lack of substance.

16. There is only one ending that my story can have. It may be happy or unhappy or merely logical. Every problem imposes its own solution. I can dictate no dénouement, for the characters involved work out their own destiny acceptable to them or to the inevitability of their problem.

17. I believe that if I am myself I am original. My life is different from the life of any one else. Manufacturing startling or spectacular originality is impossible. There is only one theme at bottom of all stories and that is Life. It is only the way I look at it which you do not know.

18. Finally I believe that each artist after all works in his own way. My way may be as good

as the ways of other writers and will surely suit my moods and my thoughts better. Each of us in his own way merely tries to state and to clarify the tragedy and comedy, the ugliness and the beauty of the things he knows and lives and feels.

19. The short story is but another medium for the expression of my reaction to the business of living. I refuse to be a clown entertaining the gallery.

20. If I depart from this credo and write what commercial policy may dictate rather than my artistic self I shall not be afraid to acknowledge the inferior character of the product rather than label it as literature. My conscience is no coward, even in defeat.

THE END

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